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BRITAIN'S BEST-SELLING MOUNTAIN BIKING MAGAZINE

Mountain Biking UK®

ISSUE 420
MAY 2023

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OUR BEST-BUY BRAIN BUCKETS FOR 2023

GET OUT THERE!

HOW TO STAY STOKED TO RIDE, WHATEVER LIFE THROWS AT YOU

GEAR CHANGES

MAJOR NEW DRIVETRAIN TECH FROM SRAM & SHIMANO

BIKETEST

AMERICAN BEAUTIES

WE SEE IF U.S. BIKES ARE STILL THE BEST IN THE WORLD

TEA & TIGERS

HUNTING FOR TRAILS IN INDIA & SAUDI ARABIA

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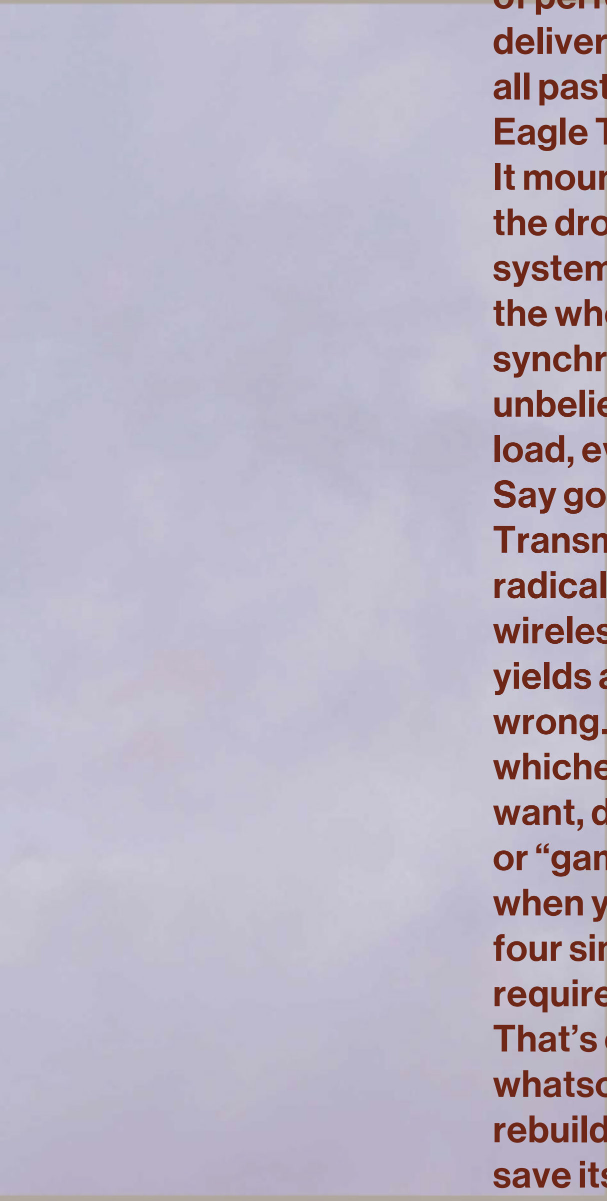

Eagle Transmission is finally here and the dream of perfect mountain bike shifting is officially delivered. The opportunity is yours to relinquish all past disappointments and skepticism of hype. Eagle Transmission requires no derailleur hanger. It mounts directly to the frame, sandwiching around the dropout like a vise and centering the entire system around the one constant on every bicycle: the wheel axle itself. Its unique cassette map feature synchronizes hardware and software creating its unbelievable ability to shift under absolute maximum load, even with the additional wattage of an eMTB. Say goodbye to all semblance of anxiety that Eagle Transmission is fragile or high maintenance, as it is radically robust and transcendentally tough. Its AXS wireless functionality is infinitely customizable and yields a cockpit so clean, the word “cockpit” seems wrong. You can program the controllers so that whichever button you want, on whichever side you want, does whatever you want. To call it a “revolution” or “game changer” would be cliché, so we won’t. But when you see how its clear setup procedure takes four simple tools, with literally zero adjustment required, you may call it a “revolution” yourself. That’s correct, there are no adjustment screws whatsoever. Just as there are no wires. Just as its rebuildable derailleur has a breakaway clutch to save itself from impacts and replaceable skid plates to keep it looking as crisp as it shifts. We could say more, but you have to try it to believe it.

SRAM

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SQUATCH Diaries

25/02/23 – LAKE DISTRICT EPIC

Lakeland native and Stif staff member Adam has spent 30 years riding these fells. There's not a trail in the district he hasn't ridden.

This weekend he packed his van and headed home for a fix of Lakeland tech aboard his Squatch, the perfect choice for multiple days of technical riding. The 78 degree seat angle means his legs will be the only limiting factor in winching up the steepest hills. With the handling dialled, he'll have all the confidence he needs when pressing send on the other side too!

SCAN HERE TO READ MORE ABOUT ADAM'S BACKCOUNTRY EPIC...

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SCOTT

HELLO

JAMES COSTLEY-WHITE
EDITOR

Weather is a British obsession, and none more so than among mountain bikers. At this time of year, I can't leave the house for a ride without obsessively checking the Met Office app, scanning the skies and changing what I'm wearing at least twice.

It makes our testing more difficult – with Rob having to head out in six inches of snow last month to get some hypothermia-courting laps in ahead of next issue's Bike of the Year test. It means photo-shoots have to be rescheduled and feature concepts tweaked – with Rach hoping to rack up multiple Lakes summits, but settling on tackling Helvellyn instead (p42). And it also means that bikes designed in sunnier climes – such as the trio of US boutique machines tested on p78 – don't always work so well in the UK, due to limited mud clearance, low-profile tyres or other issues.

If it weren't for that inclement weather, though, our hillsides wouldn't be so verdant, our woodlands so teaming with flora and fauna, and we wouldn't develop the handling skills that have made British racers such a force to be reckoned with on the world circuit. Having said that, right now I'd happily swap all that for a chance to join Dan Milner in India (p50)! See you on the trails…

James

mbuk@ourmedia.co.uk mbukmagazine MBUKmag

Mountain Biking UK
TRAIL HELMETS
GET OUT THERE!
HOW TO STAY STOKED TO RIDE, WHATEVER LIFE THROWS AT YOU
GEAR CHANGES
AMERICAN BEAUTIES

ON THE COVER

Rider Tom Öhler and Anita Gehrig
Location Saudi Arabia
Photographer Martin Bissig

MOUNTAIN BIKING IS FOR EVERYONE

All of us who bring *MBUK* to life are committed to creating content that reflects and celebrates the diverse backgrounds and interests of our readers, and the MTB community as a whole. While we always strive to be inclusive, we need to do better and have begun work on a plan to drive meaningful change, but we know it's a work in progress. We'd love to hear from you and are open to suggestions on how we can create positive change together. If you've got a story to share or would like to get involved, email us at **mbuk@ourmedia.co.uk**.

IN THE MAG THIS MONTH

ISLA SHORT
WORLD CUP XC RACER
Newly signed to Ghost Factory Racing, Scottish lass Isla is gunning for some top results in 2023 – we find out what makes her tick on p13

RACHEL BENNET
MBUK STAFF WRITER
Our Rach has been busy, heading up to Cumbria for a riding feature (p42) and Trail Crew (p114), as well as filing her debut First Ride (p31)

DAN MILNER
GRIZZLED MOUNTAIN MAN
Adventurer Dan has been a regular in the pages of *MBUK* for years, always reporting in from some far-flung locale – this issue, India (p50)

NILS AMELINCKX
AN INSPIRATION, FRANKLY
Refusing to let cancer take him without a fight, Nils has also set up Rider Resilience to help others facing adversity – check out his tips on p100

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Hunting for trails in Saudi Arabia

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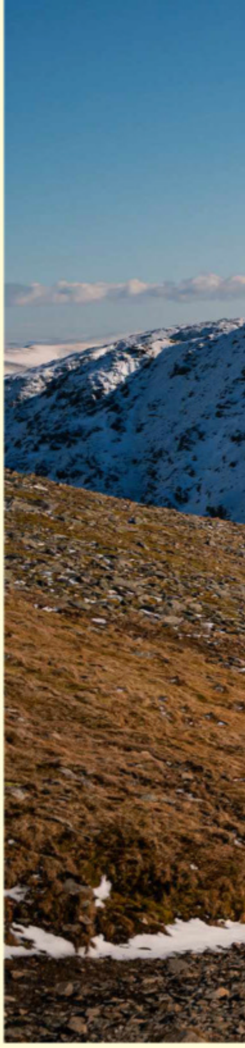
Three US-bred trail bikes reviewed



FEATURES

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MBUK's Rach jumps in at the deep end, tackling Helvellyn in the Lakes amid knee-deep snow and icy rocks

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Dan Milner takes the Darjeeling train to venture deep into the Himalayas and find remote, otherworldly trails

57 Just an Illusion
Saudi Arabia has history, culture and incredible landscapes, but does it have the trails to draw MTB tourism?

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Grips – sticky or smooth, firm or soft, these are an important contact point

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Where we've ridden and what we've changed this month

78 Biketest
Three top-end American trail bikes – do big bucks equal big thrills?

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Trail helmets – nine of the latest lids tested for comfort and performance

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Nils Amelinckx shares his experience of staying motivated to get out and ride when life is tough

104 Grimetime
How to get ride-fit for spring, make your own energy bars, plus your tech questions answered

106 Big Ride
A military theme this month, with an exploration of Salisbury's Imber Range, plus two bonus routes

114 Trail Crew
We head up to Whinlatter trail centre in the Lake District for a snowy lap of the Altura loops

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10 Out Front
The hottest stories, shots and gear in MTBing this month – including Chris Akrigg, Joe Breeze and Isla Short, new bikes from Canyon and Cannondale, the latest SRAM and Shimano kit, your letters and pics, and much more

28 First Rides
We check out Santa Cruz's short-travel 5010 'mullet' bike, BMC's Fourstroke XC race rig and Scott's Spark 940 rapid trail all-rounder

34 First Looks
The freshest new kit from Formula, Race Face, Reynolds and ODI, plus Canyon's Spectral CF 8

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What's in store for *MBUK* 421!

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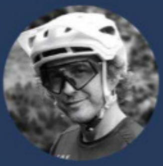
A mountain mission
in the Lake District

MEET THE TEAM

Which bit of bike kit does your head in?

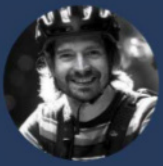
JAMES COSTLEY-WHITE
EDITOR
I love the ride feel and flat-resistance of tubeless tyres, but hate the faff

RACHEL BENNET
STAFF WRITER
We're nearly there, but front derailleurs need to be gone from all MTBs!



JAMES BLACKWELL
ART EDITOR
Crap tyres! A surefire way to ruin your ride and crush your confidence

JULIA BROUSSIER
DEPUTY ART EDITOR
Pedals. Flats are skin-graters and clipless are handcuffs for the feet – pick your poison!



CHRIS BARNARD
PRODUCTION EDITOR
Saddles! No matter how soft the seat or how thick my liner shorts, I get a sore arse

"RETURNING TO OUR GUESTHOUSE, WE'RE SERVED STEAMED MOMOS. JUST BEYOND ITS WINDOWS, YAKS ROAM UNDER A FULL MOON, THEIR SNORTS CONDENSING IN THE FREEZING AIR

A proper MTB adventure high up in the Himalayas **p50**

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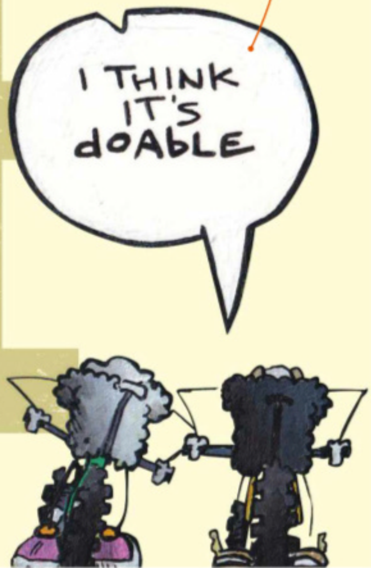


Out Front

WELCOME TO THE WORLD OF MOUNTAIN BIKING

Alan Danby

FREEZE FRAME

COASTAL CREATIVITY

Sometimes, to get the best riding shots you have to head off the beaten track. That's what snapper Alan Danby did to get this epic sunset shot of his riding buddy Ciaran King. He explains: "Ci and I are always searching for fresh lines and new angles along the North Devon coast, which we're lucky to call home. Whenever we're out riding, we try to get creative with the surroundings and landscape. We stumbled across this location, between Lynmouth and Minehead, while driving to the Triscombe DH trails. An old, unused piece of trail created the perfect drop down in front of a scenic backdrop, so we made a plan to come back and hit it up at sunset. This was the result."

MBUK

Play Time

Check out our latest vids to hit YouTube

ALREADY ONLINE!

A lap with... Olly Wilkins
Shredding Surrey Hills loam and S4P with the one-and-only Odub

Should YOU mullet your mountain bike?
Will shows us why he's so fond of mixing wheel sizes

Closing time at Revs
Hear the full story of Revolution Bike Park as we bid a fond farewell – for now...

Gear changes
Self-confessed bike dork Tom Law embraces cable/hanger-less riding

COMING UP NEXT!

Trail Crew: Dirt Farm
Shaun Bevan and Meg James take us for some hot laps at the venue formerly known as BMCC

To watch these and more, head to **YouTube.com/BikeRadar**

DNA

Scottish XC star **Isla Short** spills the beans on type-two fun, hitting big jumps and dodgy calendars

WHO IS...

ISLA SHORT

Known for her big smile and enthusiasm for pushing hard, Isla has been into cycling since her early years. She began racing nationals aged 14 and has gone on to represent Scotland at the Commonwealth Games and Great Britain at the World Champs. For 2023, Isla is on the Ghost Factory Racing team, alongside four other world-class women

WHO IS ISLA SHORT?
A Scottish cross-country racer for Ghost Factory Racing. First and foremost I love bikes, the mountains and my homeland.

WHAT ARE YOU KNOWN FOR?
Riding up hills fast. If the trail is steep, I can go down pretty quickly, too. I leave the flat corners and berms to others!

DESCRIBE A TYPICAL DAY...
Every day starts with porridge, that's non-negotiable. Training can be riding, running or 'gymming'. At the moment, my afternoons are spent cleaning myself up, because Scotland in the winter is a mess. Otherwise, it's all the exciting unseen bits of being a pro athlete – logistics, media, planning. I try to spend frequent time away, in my kayak or out with the dogs somewhere.

FIRST BIKE?
My sister's old Trek. I kept stealing it on camping holidays so my parents finally gave it to me.

WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU WERE REALLY STOKED?
Earlier this year, when I went to South Africa with my team. It was the first time I've been able to train with a group of girls who can push me in the way I need. It's new for me to have wheels to follow like this, and I'm enjoying it so much!

WHO'S YOUR FAVOURITE PERSON/PEOPLE TO RIDE WITH?
It doesn't get better than getting out into the hills with my boyfriend, Scott. We share the same love for bikes and feel fulfilled by similar things. I miss riding with the Ghost girls, though – training is 10 times easier when we do it together.

ANY UNUSUAL BIKE SET-UP PREFERENCES?
For the first time ever, probably not! I just run a super-short, negative-rise stem.

FAVOURITE BIKE COMPONENT?
Electronic shifting! I never thought I'd prefer it, but it's so easy, especially in the cold.

WORST MTB TREND?
The *Cyclepassion* calendar [now-defunct publication that got top female racers to pose semi-naked ~ ed]. WTF.

INTERESTS OUTSIDE OF MTB?
Hill walking, kayaking, swimming, my dogs, running – anything that gets me into the wild!

IF YOU COULD ONLY RIDE ONE SPOT, WHERE WOULD IT BE?
The Tweed Valley, obviously.

SCARIEST THING YOU'VE DONE ON A BIKE?
Last autumn, I hit some big jumps (for me) after a huge crash on a gap. I wanted to remove the fear as soon as possible, so I did a jump line I'll probably never do again. I'm OK with that.

ONE THING NO ONE KNOWS ABOUT YOU?
I'm an open book. Most people know too much about me!

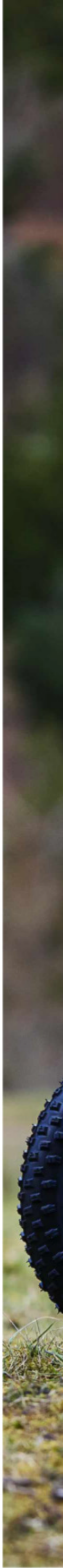
WHAT SIMPLE THINGS MAKE YOU HAPPY?
The things that I find simple, as someone of privilege, may not be simple to others. I like the sunshine, the smell of grass in the summer, and porridge in the mornings, of course!

BIGGEST RIDE OF YOUR LIFE?
I've done a few 'biggest rides' around the Tweed Valley. This winter, I did one where my friends bailed after 80km, it was dark and raining, so I put my earphones in, switched my lights on and disappeared into type-two paradise. So good! My biggest achievement continues to be my fifth-place finish at the Leogang World Cup in 2020. I'll forever know that I was 'good enough' because of that ride.

WHAT'S YOUR BIGGEST WEAKNESS?
I don't like the word weakness. Operating in a high-pressure environment for much of the year doesn't suit me and I have to work really hard on that to stay happy and perform well.

TREASURED POSSESSION?
A necklace my sister bought me, made from pounamu, a stone found in New Zealand. She lives there and I don't see her often, but she's my best friend and I wear the stone every day so that I can pretend she's closer.

IF YOU WEREN'T A PRO RIDER, WHAT WOULD YOU BE DOING?
I'd like to go back to uni and finish a degree. It's taken me a long time to figure out what I'm passionate about, but I want to do something within sociology, so I can try to help the world be better, in a small way. ✪



GEAR CHANGES

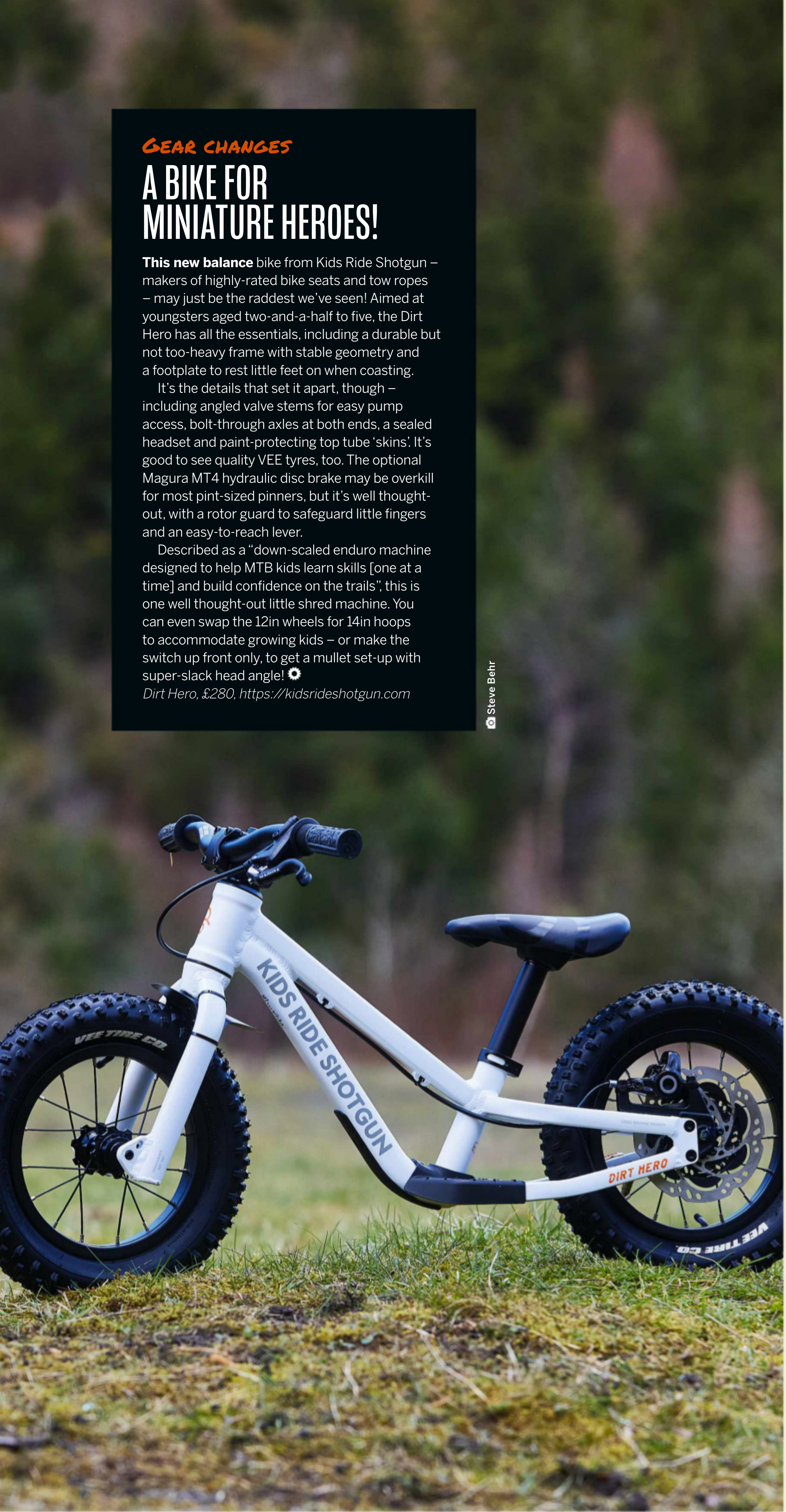
A BIKE FOR MINIATURE HEROES!

This new balance bike from Kids Ride Shotgun – makers of highly-rated bike seats and tow ropes – may just be the raddest we've seen! Aimed at youngsters aged two-and-a-half to five, the Dirt Hero has all the essentials, including a durable but not too-heavy frame with stable geometry and a footplate to rest little feet on when coasting.

It's the details that set it apart, though – including angled valve stems for easy pump access, bolt-through axles at both ends, a sealed headset and paint-protecting top tube 'skins'. It's good to see quality VEE tyres, too. The optional Magura MT4 hydraulic disc brake may be overkill for most pint-sized pinners, but it's well thought-out, with a rotor guard to safeguard little fingers and an easy-to-reach lever.

Described as a "down-scaled enduro machine designed to help MTB kids learn skills [one at a time] and build confidence on the trails", this is one well thought-out little shred machine. You can even swap the 12in wheels for 14in hoops to accommodate growing kids – or make the switch up front only, to get a mullet set-up with super-slack head angle!

Dirt Hero, £280, https://kidsrideshotgun.com



Steve Behr

MBUK Month

The highs & lows of life on the mag

▲

It's great to see some real legends of the sport slated for induction into the MTB Hall of Fame. Rob Warner should need no introduction, as a one-time Team *MBUK* racer, the first Brit to win a DH World Cup and the face of MTB with Red Bull TV. His old partner-in-crime Shaun Palmer (pictured below, with Rob!) is another worthy inclusion, with an impact way beyond his short time racing DH. Also due to be inducted are Norwegian XC ace Gunn-Rita Dahle Flesjå and trail builder Diddie Schneider. Congrats to all!

▼

Last month we teased an article about Daryl Brown's prep for the gargantuan jumps of DarkFEST. Unfortunately, Daryl came a cropper just before we were due to shoot with him, when a slow-speed crash left him impaled on a rusty iron rod. Ouch. Heal up soon, fella!

▲

Good news on the sustainability front – tyre recyclers Velorim have teamed up with battery reprocessors Eco-Recover to set up a national storage, collection and recycling service for scrap e-bike batteries. Make sure your local bike shop know about it!

▲

Also, Muc-Off say their eco efforts have saved an amazing 208 tons of plastic from going to landfill in the past three years. Good work!

Whyte/Roo Fowler

FREEZE FRAME

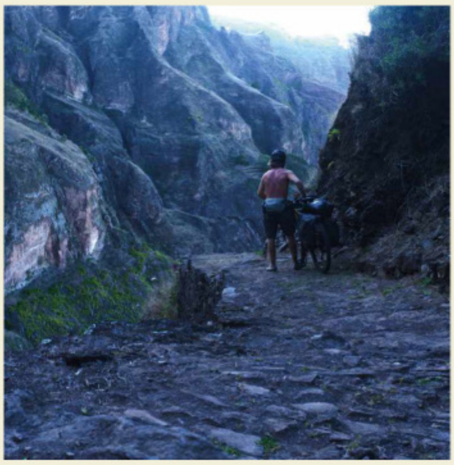
YORKSHIRE GRIT

"I just like riding, like, the hardest, gnarliest, slipperiest, most awkward stuff. You know, the stuff that, like, you wouldn't want to walk down really, let alone ride a bike [down]," says Chris Akrigg, introducing his new video, *Going Beyond, Episode 1*. It's an approach the Yorkshireman has become famous for, from the competitions where he made his name in the 1990s (he's a six-time British Biketrial champ), to the web edits that have cemented his reputation as one of the sport's best technical riders. Newly signed to UK brand Whyte – a match that seems made in heaven, with both parties being known for their no-nonsense approach to riding, on all kinds of bikes – Chris shows no signs of reining in his ambitions. We can't wait to see what he gets up to next! You can check out the latest vid on YouTube. ✪

Say What!?

“KNOWING YOU’LL LET FRIENDS DOWN GIVES YOU MORE OF AN IMPETUS TO TURN UP, EVEN IF EVERY BONE IN YOUR BODY WANTS TO BAIL”

Nils Amelinckx dispenses wisdom on staying motivated to ride **P100**



LIFE ON THE ROAD

THORFINN BARTON

Part 5: The young Scot takes to the water

Thorfinn’s epic journey from the north-west tip of Scotland on his steel hardtail comes to an end

Another wave pours over the deck, soaking me and my poor old bike. Above, a steady breeze fills two large sails. Trapped between the canvas and the crack of dawn rises the steep, volcanic landscape of Santo Antão, Cape Verde. For four days I’ve been crewing this boat, bound from Dakar, Senegal, in search of undiscovered trails. Here is where I’m hoping to find them. The island lurches from the Atlantic Ocean like the spine of a giant reptile, almost 2,000m high. Dotted along this backbone are large craters, from which smaller ridges run down towards the ocean. Interconnecting all this is a superb network of cobbled roads, dirt tracks and hiking trails, built for accessing the terraced gardens and orchards that line the mountainside, but easily adapted into a large play park for bikes! From vertiginous switchbacks, through scenic coastal paths to slopes of shingly pumice, it proves difficult to get bored in Santo Antão. The riding is brilliant, but what really makes it is the immensity of the landscape, the charm of the villages and the taste of the *poncha*. Eight months since leaving Cape Wrath, after some truly incredible experiences, it’s now time for me to head home. I trust though, that the two-wheeled adventure will be continued by many more to come.

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STAR LETTER WINS...

Lezyne Pocket Torque Drive torque wrench & Alloy Drive (M) mini pump **worth £105**

THAT'S GOTTA HURT WINS...

661 Recon Advance knee pads (M) & Rail Classic gloves (L) **worth £125**

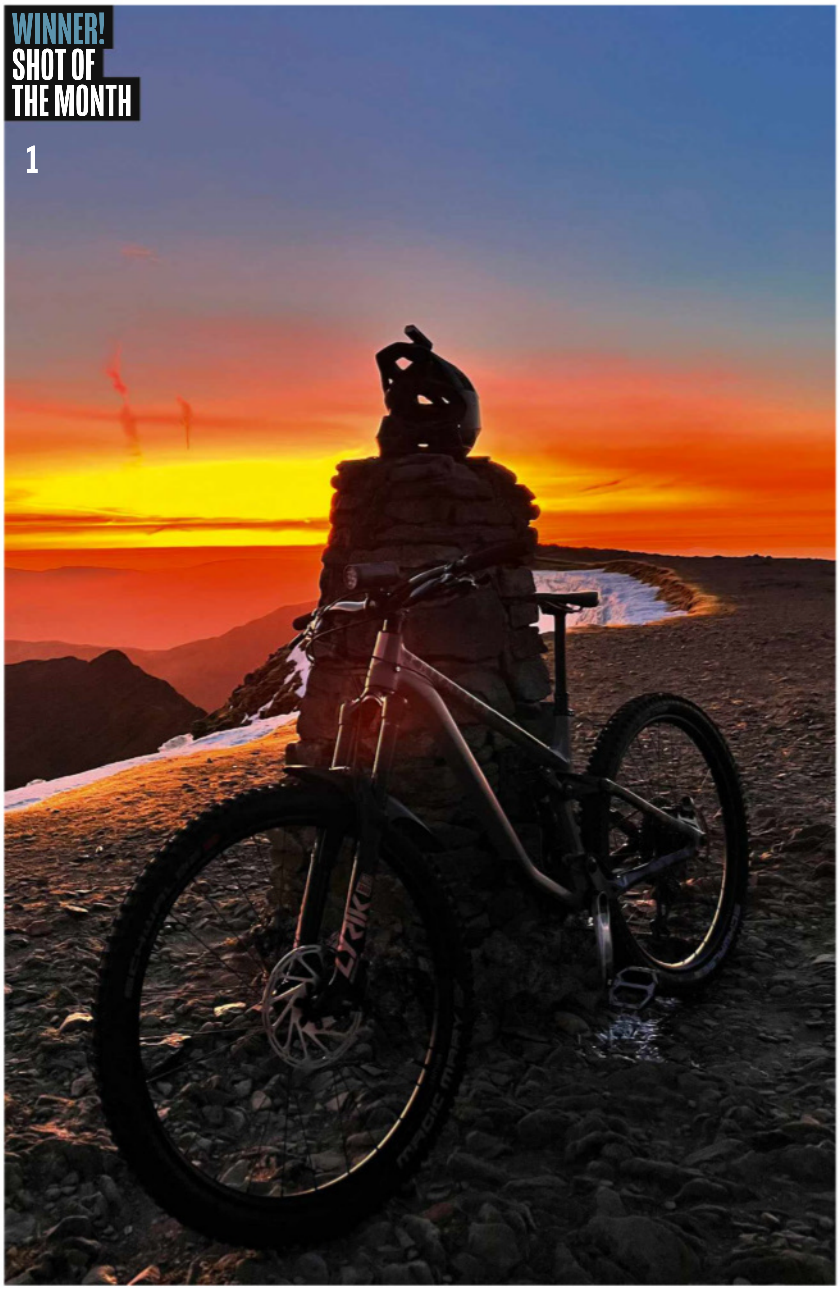
SHOT OF THE MONTH WINS...

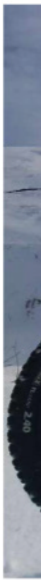
DMR OiOi saddle, Deathgrip (Thin) grips & V11 pedals **worth £123**

INSTA-BANGERS WINS...

Lezyne Super Drive 1600XXL & KTV Pro Smart lights **worth £160**

WINNER! SHOT OF THE MONTH





STAR LETTER
COST OF RIDING CRISIS

In your April issue, there was a £14k hardtail. A hardtail! I, like many others, am getting priced out of the sport. Even a shit hardtail is now over £1,200, with a disposable drivetrain and twangy pogo-stick fork.

In a time where many of us are scared to open our electricity bills, diamond-encrusted carbon fibre wonder bikes are, to some, distasteful. Four years back, there were bikes around £5k that I could dream of owning, and ones for half that price that I could (if I made big sacrifices) ride on the kind of trails I love and be proud to own. Now, that dream has disappeared over the financial horizon.

Desultory two per cent pay rises for many and 10 per cent inflation, combined with manufacturers' greed, means the aspiration of having a great mountain bike is available to a shrinking few. I think it's time for me to try more affordable hobbies, such as Formula One, polo or cooking with truffles!

Brian King, *via email*

You're right, Brian. Many people are being priced out of the MTB market. However, it's not down to greed – instead, it's rising material, import and labour costs that are driving the price of bikes up, at a time when people's purses are already being pinched. Brands are pushing their higher-end models because the customers those are aimed at are the ones most likely to have spare cash. Here at MBUK, we always make sure to showcase more affordable bikes as well as dream machines – most recently, with £1,600 trail bikes in issue 416 and a 'budget' category in next month's Bike of the Year test.

1. Shot of the Month: **James Canterbury** grabbed this amazing shot of the sun coming up over Helvellyn in the Lake District, ready for a dawn raid

2. A rad day's DH racing at Gawton Gravity Hub saw girls from across Devon and Cornwall become firm friends. Lovely stuff!

3. Rob Lake took on Ladybower in the Peak District in heavy snow

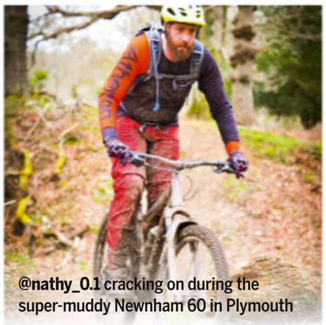
4. Sixteen-year-old **Uwan Allen** styles it up at BikePark Wales

INSTA-BANGERS

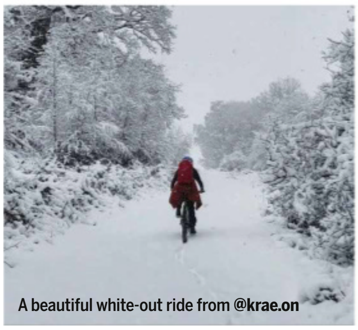
Tag your Instagram pics with **#mbukletters.** We'll pick four each issue and our favourite will win a Lezyne Super Drive 1600XXL and KTV Pro Smart light worth £160. Usual T&Cs apply.

A stunning shot by **@dalewilkes** of an industrial night ride at Pleasley Pit, East Midlands

Moody Peak District skies by **@samdexter60**



@nathy_0.1 cracking on during the super-muddy Newnham 60 in Plymouth



A beautiful white-out ride from **@krae.on**

THAT'S GOTTA HURT WINNER!

Gemma and Ania got some big old bruises on a recent MTB holiday. Gemma explains what happened...

"We went to Madeira in October, and our standard airport purchase is, of course, *MBUK*! We loved soaking up all the vital information in the how-to section during the journey, before we set out on a week-long riding trip with Freeride Madeira. After day two – where we faced some seriously technical trails – we ended up wishing we'd paid a little more attention to the mag! We both took some big falls, resulting in these impressive bruises, but it didn't stop us from riding and completing the week with massive grins. We can't wait for our next adventure!"

Spoke Tension

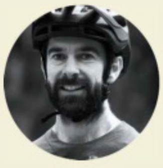
THE MTB ISSUES THAT REALLY GRIND OUR GEARS

maxx terra
EXO PROTECTION
TR TUBELESS READY

This month the topic troubling Our tech team is...

WHY DO SO MANY BRANDS MAKE THE SAME SPEC MISTAKES?

From budget-friendly machines sold at superstores to superbikes costing the same as a house deposit, we get a chance to test them all. And one thing we can't help noticing is that brands keep getting the same things wrong. We're not talking dodgy geometry or suspect suspension kinematics – although some manufacturers definitely need to work on those! – but parts specifications. All too often, brands focus on attention-grabbing parts that look appealing in a catalogue or on the shop floor, when the money would be better spent on improving other areas of the bike's performance. Or they jump onboard industry trends that let them use the latest buzzwords in their marketing bumf, but have little impact – or even some negative traits – out on the trails. These are four of the most common spec missteps we see, which make our testers roll their eyes each and every time.



ROBIN WEAVER
TECH EDITOR IN CHIEF

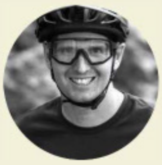
35mm handlebars – the standard we never needed

The shift to 35mm bars happened a number of years ago (although not by every brand, it should be noted), yet still baffles me to this day. While the increase in diameter from 31.8mm has some claimed benefits, they're not necessarily ones I was ever desperate for.

For starters, while both alloy and carbon fibre 35mm bars offer a slight weight saving compared to their skinnier brethren (because the larger diameter allows the tube walls to be made thinner without compromising strength), we're talking tens of grams here – not exactly life-changing. And of all the places you'd look to save weight, is the handlebar the place you'd start? I suspect not.

Additionally, 35mm bars tend to feel stiffer than a 31.8mm bar of equivalent width. This is great if you value pinpoint-accurate steering and precise handling, but the extra stiffness also makes for a less comfortable bar. So, while things may feel reactive and laser-focused at first, your hands and arms will start to suffer soon enough. You can then wave goodbye to those accuracy gains on rougher trails over a couple of minutes long.

While I have ridden some great 35mm options (OneUp's carbon bar does a brilliant job of muting vibrations, for example), I really don't believe they offer any significant improvement over the old 31.8mm standard.



LUKE MARSHALL
TECH WRITER

Hit the anchors and stop speccing low-budget brakes

Shiny gold stanchions or a next-model-up rear mech may look good, but too often brands skimp on the brake spec to afford these 'upgrades'. To be blunt, cutting corners with the thing controlling your speed is a bad idea.

In particular, underpowered brakes are a recipe for disaster. They harm confidence, hinder learning and, at worst, can be downright dangerous. Can brakes be too powerful? Probably. But I bet that's not as frightening to a novice as lacklustre or unpredictable performance.

A top-end Shimano XTR drivetrain doesn't give me anything more than Shimano Deore in tricky situations, but top-spec brakes give a hell of a lot more confidence than budget stoppers. I'm not picking on Shimano here – they make some perfectly powerful cheap anchors. However, if I have to choose between a mid-level drivetrain and budget brakes, or mid-priced stoppers and entry-level gears, I know which way I'm headed.

The industry has, for years, pushed innovations in transmission tech (more sprockets, 1x set-ups, electronic shifting) as the key to an improved riding experience, and with this comes an inflated focus on speccing high-tier drivetrain components. Perhaps as consumers, we need to start lusting after the bikes with the best brakes? After all, they'll do far more for your riding than a fancy rear derailleur.

ALEX EVANS
BIKERADAR TECH EDITOR

Just say no to lightweight tyres on hard-hitting bikes

Hammering down my favourite trails in good conditions leaves me feeling elated. But if I puncture, any ride becomes a flat, depressing affair – especially when that tyre really shouldn't have gone pop at all. Some flats are unavoidable, but too many are caused by brands speccing tyres that are unsuitable for a bike's intended purpose.

Many manufacturers insist on fitting lightweight tyres on hard-hitting trail and enduro bikes, to reduce headline weight figures. Some even do it on their e-bikes. This needs to stop. Whenever I've tested either type of bike with lightweight tyres, I've invariably slashed, punctured or – at the more extreme end – ripped the tyre off the rim in short order. I'm not talking full-on XC rubber, but tyres with 'trail' casings, such as Maxxis's EXO Protection or Schwalbe's SnakeSkin. These just aren't acceptable on a bike designed for hard and fast riding.

Brands need to accept that, if they market a bike as hardcore, it requires appropriately chunky rubber, and that's going to increase the catalogue weight number. Tougher tyres comes with other benefits beyond reducing punctures. They enable you to run lower pressures, improving grip, control and speed – all of which outweigh the increase in weight, even for lighter or slower riders.

While lightweight tyres do have a place on cross-country race bikes, once you start venturing into trail bike territory, swapping out skinny rubber for chunkier, more protective equivalents is a clear win. And it should be brands doing this, so riders don't have to shell out extra money for tyres that should be right from the get-go.

TOM MARVIN
SENIOR TECH EDITOR

Stick 800mm bars on (just about) everything, please!

A good cockpit set-up is critical to feeling comfortable and confident on the trail. Yet, I find more and more bikes simply don't provide the opportunity to get the fit and feel just right. While Rob thinks the 35mm clamp standard is the big issue, I've got beef with narrow bars.

Personally, I like an 800mm bar. I've got moderately broad shoulders and have become accustomed to the feel and leverage of a full-width bar. As such, I get frustrated when brands fit 780, 760 or even 740mm bars as stock. If 800mm sounds too wide to you, remember that it's easy for those who prefer a narrower bar (Luke and Rob, for example) to cut theirs down. On the other hand, save for a couple of niche bar-extender options, it's impossible for me to widen bars to suit my tastes. I'm left with my hands too close together, or have to replace the bar altogether.

Narrower bars do, of course, have a place on smaller bikes. I've seen svelte riders on size XS and S bikes riding as if they were built like the Hulk, because they've jumped on the wide-bar trend without properly thinking it through. They also suit (some) XC bikes, where you don't require as much steering leverage and weight-saving is perceived to be more important.

However, when it comes to bikes designed to get you down the hill as fast and comfortably as possible, while also fitting the widest possible range of riders, I see no reason not to spec 800mm handlebars on each and every one out there. ✪

Want That!

NATURAL SELECTION

Spring has sprung, so here's some fresh gear inspired by the natural environment

1

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1 Smith Forefront 2 trail helmet

Packed with safety features – including impact-absorbing Koroyd and a MIPS slip-plane – this stylish open-face lid is available in a ton of muted tones to suit all tastes.
£199 *www.smithoptics.com*

2 adidas Terrex Multi vest

Packing up into its own pocket, this padded gilet can be stashed in your pack for emergencies or worn as a midlayer on colder days. Made from 100 per cent recyled polyester and nylon with a PFC-free coating, it'll shrug off light showers, too.
£120 *www.adidas.co.uk*

3 Specialized Gambit full-face enduro helmet

With a carbon fibre shell and a ton of large vents, this lid is properly lightweight, but it's also DH-certified, with added MIPS protection. Choose from stealthy options like this one or some crazy colours.
£295 *www.specialized.com*

4 DHaRCO Moonlight women's 3/4-sleeve jersey

We love this Aussie brand's surf-inspired aesthetics. This palm-frond design takes us off to warmer climes – and should we ever get some sun over here, the quick-drying fabric should help us stay cool
£59 *https://dharco.com*

5 POC Reform jersey

We've never seen 'prehnite' as a colour option before, but this jersey shares its hue with the light-green gemstone, said to have healing properties. POC do their bit by making it from 100 per cent recycled fabric.
£75 *www.pocsports.com*

6 Rapha Trail Lightweight women's riding pants

These lightweight four-way stretch trousers are designed to be highly breathable, with a DWR finish. They should be a great option for spring – and don't worry fellas, there's a version for you, too!
£120 *www.rapha.cc*

7 dhb Moda women's jersey & bib shorts

This pairing's got you covered for warmer-weather XC or – shudder – road missions, made from lightweight, wicking, bluesign-approved fabrics.
Jersey £50, shorts £65
www.dhbsport.com

8 Rapha Trail hip pack

With room for two water bottles, loads of storage for trail essentials and a stash-cord on top for a jacket, this bumbag has most eventualities covered.
£70 *www.rapha.cc*

9 DHaRCO Driftwood men's gravity pants

Made from bluesign-approved fabric, these trousers are breathable and quick-drying, with a water-resistant finish. They're available in some truly outrageous colours and patterns, but don't worry, DHaRCO also do black!
£126 *https://dharco.com*

10 100% Armega goggles

Top-of-the-line eyewear with a removable nose guard, 'Ultra HD' lens and a billion colour combos to choose from (well, 14 – but that's still a lot!).
£99.99 *www.silverfish-uk.com*

11 Specialized 2FO Roost Canvas shoes

Killer-looking, on or off the bike, these pair a canvas upper (for the warmer months to come) with a 'SlipNot' sole, to keep your feet firmly fixed in place.
£110 *www.specialized.com*

12 Specialized Trail SWAT jacket

This lightweight, breathable, DWR-treated windproof, which packs into its own pocket, looks just the ticket for rides in our unpredictable climate. With simple styling and features, it's all about performance.
£110 *www.specialized.com*

13 Spada Topo jersey

With its large topographic back print and olive hue, this slinky-feeling jersey stands out on the trail. The thin thermal fabric is ideal for transition season rides when you're normally too hot in a jacket but too cool without one. £49.99
https://spadaclothing.co.uk

14 Elite Fly Tex 550ml bottle

Available in a range of earthy (and brighter) colours, this thin-walled bottle is super-squeezy for easy hydration.
£5.99 *www.freewheel.co.uk*

15 Fox Union Clipless shoes

Fox's first foray into the shoe game is looking good! We love this 'mocha' colourway, and the 'Ultratec' outsole seems good and grippy. ✪
£159.99 *https://foxracing.co.uk*

Trail Fuel

The food and drink that sustains some of our favourite riders

JOE BREEZE

The word 'legend' is bandied about loosely these days, but designing one of the first mountain bikes, now in America's Smithsonian Museum, surely gives Joe Breeze OG status in the sport. Now aged 70, he runs the Marin Museum of Bicycling in California, which houses the Mountain Bike Hall of Fame, and remains an avid rider.

✎ Kari Young 📷 Connie Breeze

"My craving for cereal in the morning is something carried over from childhood. When I was racing in the 1970s and '80s, I'd down three bowls each morning. By 1990, I'd cut back to two, and just this year I limited myself to one.

"I deviate from the norm in that I don't drink coffee, never have. Somehow I'm able to get up wide awake. Maybe it's my night-long desire for the next bowl of cereal!

"The cereal carries me through the day and sometimes I'm so absorbed in work that I fail to heed a lunch call. If someone's grabbing a sandwich, I'll join in to be sociable. Turkey and [Monterey] Jack cheese, lots of mustard!

"For dinner, I'm a fan of Mexican food. My go-to burrito place shut down, so my wife and I rely on our collection of recipes, including taco salad (below) and taco soup. I'd grown accustomed to having a beer with my food. Now, due to an atrial-fibrillation issue, I find Heineken 0.0 just as satisfying.

"I have a preference for eating with my hands. Since finding Trader Joe's Quinoa Cowboy burgers, which my wife prepares with Dorset Cheddar cheese and avocado in a toasted wholewheat bun, I haven't looked back!" ✪

MBUK

SUBS ZONE

YOUR EXCLUSIVE MEMBERSHIP AREA

JAMES COSTLEY-WHITE
EDITOR

Welcome to the *MBUK* Subs Zone! As one of our much-appreciated subscribers, not only do you get a big discount on the shop price and every issue delivered direct to your door (along with any cover gifts or supplements), but you also have access to this special membership area of the mag, where you can obtain exclusive benefits every month. Ranging from subscriber-only competitions to special offers, discounts and bonus content, there's something different each issue to reward you for being a loyal reader of *MBUK*.

This issue, we're giving away two full sets of 100% riding kit, courtesy of the US brand's UK distributors, Silverfish. They've kindly provided us with men's and women's bundles of Ridecamp gear, along with Altis helmets and Strata 2 goggles. So, if you fancy refreshing your riding wardrobe and looking like a real pro when you're out on the trails, what are you waiting for? Get your entry in now!

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mbuk@ourmedia.co.uk mbukmagazine mbukmag

WIN!

MEN'S & WOMEN'S OUTFITS UP FOR GRABS, WORTH OVER £300 EACH!

A FULL SET OF RIDING KIT FROM 100%

San Diego-based 100% have enjoyed huge success in recent years, combining styling inspired by their motocross roots with on-trend aesthetics and cutting-edge tech. Their helmets, eyewear and riding kit have appeared on podiums the world over – thanks to the likes of six-time DH world champ Loïc Bruni, two-time Enduro World Series winner Isabeau Courdurier and Olympic XC champ Jolanda Neff – and are now a common sight in uplift vans and out on the trails across the UK. We've got two full outfits from 100% to give away, consisting of a load of trail-focused Ridecamp gear, plus a pair of Strata 2 goggles and an Altis open-face helmet, complete with the brand's Smartshock rotational protective system. This is going to be a popular competition, so get your entry in now!
www.100percent.com

THE PRIZE

TWO WINNERS WILL EACH GET

100% Altis trail helmet
100% Strata 2 goggles of their choice
100% Ridecamp jersey
100% Ridecamp shorts
100% Ridecamp knee pads
100% Ridecamp gloves
100% riding socks

HOW TO ENTER

For your chance to win a full set of 100% kit, visit this link
http://bit.ly/mbukmag420
and answer the very simple question.
Full terms & conditions can be found on page 120.
Closing date **11 May 2023**

Helmet £89.99
Jersey from £34.99
Goggles from £32.99
Shorts £59.99

Gloves from £22.99

Socks from £11.99

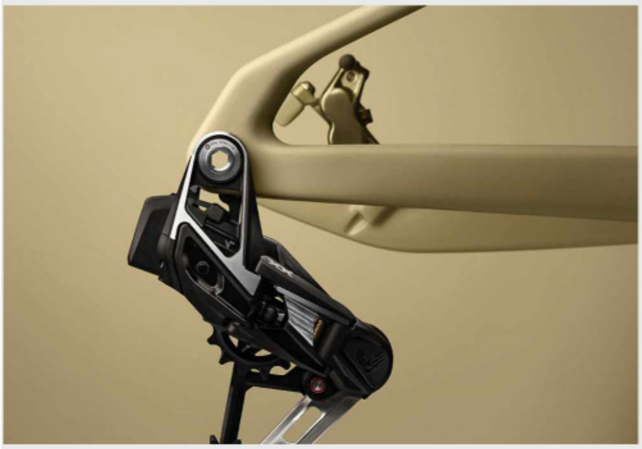
STOKED FOLK!

LATEST SUBS ZONE PRIZEWINNERS

DMR pedals, grips and pedal spanners go to **Andrew Dunachie, Gary Fields, Cameron Kelly, David Mitchell, Luke Morgan** & **Mark Shires**

THE NEWLY-UNVEILED BIKES
& KIT GETTING US EXCITED THIS MONTH

Launch Pad



WAVE GOODBYE TO THE REAR MECH HANGER!

New direct-mount **SRAM Eagle** drivetrains launched

New 'T-type' SRAM Eagle AXS drivetrains have landed, with an innovative direct-mount design that sees the rear mech clamped to the frame at the wheel axle, removing the need for a derailleur hanger. Here are five things you need to know:

1. THEY'RE ONLY COMPATIBLE WITH U.D.H. FRAMES

Described as the "biggest product introduction in SRAM's history", the new drivetrains will only fit on bikes equipped with the brand's Universal Derailleur Hanger. Released back in 2018, the UDH was the precursor to T-type – a standardised hanger, which was compatible with previous-generation rear mechs. What you may not know is that it also acted as a placeholder for T-type – removing the UDH from a frame reveals the 'Hangerless Interface' required for the new mechs.

2. NO SCREWS TO TWEAK

The derailleurs have no B-tension or limit-screw adjustments. SRAM say these were only needed previously because of the massive variation in mech hanger designs. By standardising the dropouts (with their Hangerless Interface) and cassette spacing (with their XD Driver), and mounting the mech co-axially with the wheel – so that its position relative to the cassette remains constant, regardless of gear choice or chain length – they reckon they've ensured no adjustment is needed.

3. THE MECHS ARE REBUILDABLE

SRAM have designed the derailleur cage, skid plate and outer parallelogram links to be user-replaceable, improving the lifespan of the mechs. A good thing, too, with T-type tech only available in pricey AXS wireless form, for now at least.

4. SHIFTING FEELS LIKE A VIDEO GAME

T-type mechs aren't compatible with current-generation SRAM AXS kit. Instead, there's a new two-button 'pod controller', which no longer mimics a conventional shifter, and is truly digital in feel. There are two mounting options – 'Bridge Clamp', which replaces MatchMaker X and integrates with SRAM brake levers and RockShox remotes, or a dedicated 'Infinity Mount' bar clamp.

5. THREE OPTIONS TO CHOOSE FROM

At launch, the new drivetrains are available at three levels – XX Eagle SL T-type AXS (from £2,355), the lightest, highest-performing option; XX Eagle T-type AXS (from £2,195), sporting burlier components; and X0 Eagle T-type AXS (from £1,715), a slightly more affordable version. We see no reason why the tech shouldn't trickle down to SRAM's cheaper groups over time, though.
www.zyrofisher.co.uk

SRAM
XX
SRAM

1X SHIMANO FOR ALL

Single-ring tech and clutch mechs trickle all the way down on the Japanese giants' new **CUES** drivetrains

Shimano have replaced their four lower-end mountain bike drivetrains – Altus, Acera, Alivio and 11-speed Deore M5100 – with new 'CUES' parts. The move comes in response to demand from bike manufacturers, who wanted a simpler-to-understand line-up and the option to spec affordable, wide-range, clutch mech-equipped 1x Shimano drivetrains. A notable omission from the brand's range until now (Deore was their previous entry point for 1x and clutch mechs), we expect these parts to prove popular and to see them specced widely on affordable bikes.

Twelve-speed Deore M6100 remains as a solid mid-tier option. Below that sit a range of new CUES components (it stands for Creating Unique ExperienceS), at three price points – U8000 (11-speed), U6000 (11- and 10-speed) and U5000 (nine-speed). Twin-ring fans needn't worry, as both 1x and 2x options are available.

Unlike Shimano's previous drivetrains, all three CUES set-ups share the same cable-pull ratio, cassette spacing and chain width, regardless of speed and where they sit in the product hierarchy. This means brands (and riders) can pick from a wide 'menu' of components and spec parts to suit their needs and price points – for example, you can pair cheaper cranks with a wide-range 11-speed cassette, if gear range is more important to you than weight-saving.

UK pricing and availability are TBC, but we expect to see the 10- and 11-speed CUES kit on bikes in the £600 to £1,000 range. *www.freewheel.co.uk*

SHIMANO
CUES

SHIMANO
CUES

GROWING HABIT

US brand **Cannondale** widen their trail bike range and make the frames longer

NEED TO KNOW

Cannondale have updated their Habit trail bike for 2023 and also added a long-travel version, with a hardtail and kids' full-sus bike to follow. Geometry is longer (with 25-30mm added to the reach of each frame), lower and slacker. The standard Habit has a 140mm fork and 130mm of rear-wheel travel, upped to 150/140mm on the Habit LT. Both are available in five sizes, in carbon fibre (with size-specific chainstays) or alloy. The latter frame is said to be 240g lighter than before, with no word yet on the weight of the carbon chassis.

WHO FOR?

Trail riders who want a light, flickable bike that's easy to maintain (external bottom bracket, SRAM universal derailleur hanger, etc).

KEY STATS

Travel: Habit 140mm/130mm, Habit LT 150/140mm, via four-bar linkage
Wheels: 29in
Frame: Carbon fibre or aluminium alloy, sizes XS-XL
Geometry: TBC
Pricing: TBC
More info: *www.cannondale.com*
Available: TBC

CANYON FIRE OUT NEW NEURONS

Full-sus revamped in a bid to make it the ultimate all-rounder

NEED TO KNOW

German brand Canyon have updated their mid-travel Neuron trail bike with significantly longer, slacker geometry for 2023, to make it more capable in rough terrain. It also has a steeper, shorter seat tube, for easier climbing and compatibility with longer dropper posts. On the carbon fibre frame (alloy option also available), the seat tube is now straight for better seatpost insertion, and the down tube slimmed for a more refined look. Canyon claim to have shaved off weight, too, plus improved reliability and functionality with updated frame hardware, protection and cable routing (through the headset). The standard bike comes in five sizes; the M, L and XL are 29ers, while the XS and S roll on 650b wheels. There's also a women's version (XS-M), with a different saddle and paint-jobs, and a 'Young Hero' edition (2XS-XS), with shorter crank arms and a lighter suspension tune.

WHO'S IT FOR?

The Neuron sits midway between Canyon's Spectral 125 and Spectral 29 trail bikes in terms of travel, with a 140mm fork and 130mm out back, but is designed for less aggressive riders who are more concerned about comfort and efficiency than all-out speed.

KEY STATS

Travel: 140mm front, 130mm rear (130mm front on Young Hero edition), via four-bar linkage
Wheels: 29in (M/L/XL)/ 650b (2XS/XS/S)
Frame: Carbon fibre or aluminium alloy, 2XS-XL
Geometry: 66-degree head angle, 76-degree seat tube angle, 455mm reach (M)
Pricing: £1,499 (YH) to £5,749 (CF LTD)
More info: *www.canyon.com*
Available: Online only, launch date TBC

TROY LEE
DESIGNS

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SCAN TO FIND OUT MORE
SADDLEBACK
HOME OF PERFORMANCE CYCLING

SANTA CRUZ 5010 CC X01 AXS RSV MX

£9,199 Fun-focused 5010 moves to a mixed-wheel set-up

SPEC

Frame 'CC' carbon fibre, 130mm travel
Fork RockShox Pike Ultimate, 140mm travel
Shock RockShox Super Deluxe Ultimate
Drivetrain SRAM GX Eagle AXS with X1 carbon cranks and X01 Eagle AXS rear mech (1x12)
Brakes SRAM Guide G2 RSC, 200mm/180mm rotors
Wheelset Santa Cruz Reserve 30|HD carbon rims on Industry Nine 1/1 hubs, Maxxis Minion DHR II 3C MaxxGrip EXO 29x2.4in (f) and 3C MaxxTerra EXO 27.5x2.4in (r) tyres
Bar/stem Santa Cruz 35 carbon, 800mm/Burgtec Enduro MK3, 42mm
Seatpost/saddle RockShox Reverb Stealth, 175mm/WTB Silverado Medium Ti
Weight 13.92kg, large size without pedals (including bottle cage plus Glovebox tool wallet and tube purse)

STRAIGHT OUT OF THE BOX & ONTO THE TRAILS

FIRST RIDES

With its nippy geometry and supportive suspension, the short-travel 5010 is designed to make the trails come alive. It's the last of Santa Cruz's bikes to make the move from 650b (aka 27.5in) wheels to a 'mullet' set-up with a larger 29in front wheel, the aim being to blend two characteristics often at odds – traction and agility.

THE FRAME

Built from Santa Cruz's top-end 'CC' carbon fibre, each frame size has a different level of stiffness, in an attempt to give a lighter rider on an XS the same ride feel as a bigger rider on an XL. Chainstay length is size-specific, too, as is the seat tube angle. New for 2023 are the 'Glovebox' – a storage compartment accessed via a port on top of the down tube – and a small sag indicator. Cables are routed internally with tube-in-tube sleeving. Other features include a SRAM universal derailleur hanger, ISCG-05 mounts and a threaded bottom bracket. The frame and bearings have a lifetime warranty.

Santa Cruz stick with their co-rotating twin-link 'VPP' design, with the lower link driving the shock. The 130mm of rear-wheel travel has less anti-squat than before, to reduce pedal kickback and give a suppler feel. A linear rate of progression should provide plenty of mid-stroke support and prevent harsh bottom-outs.

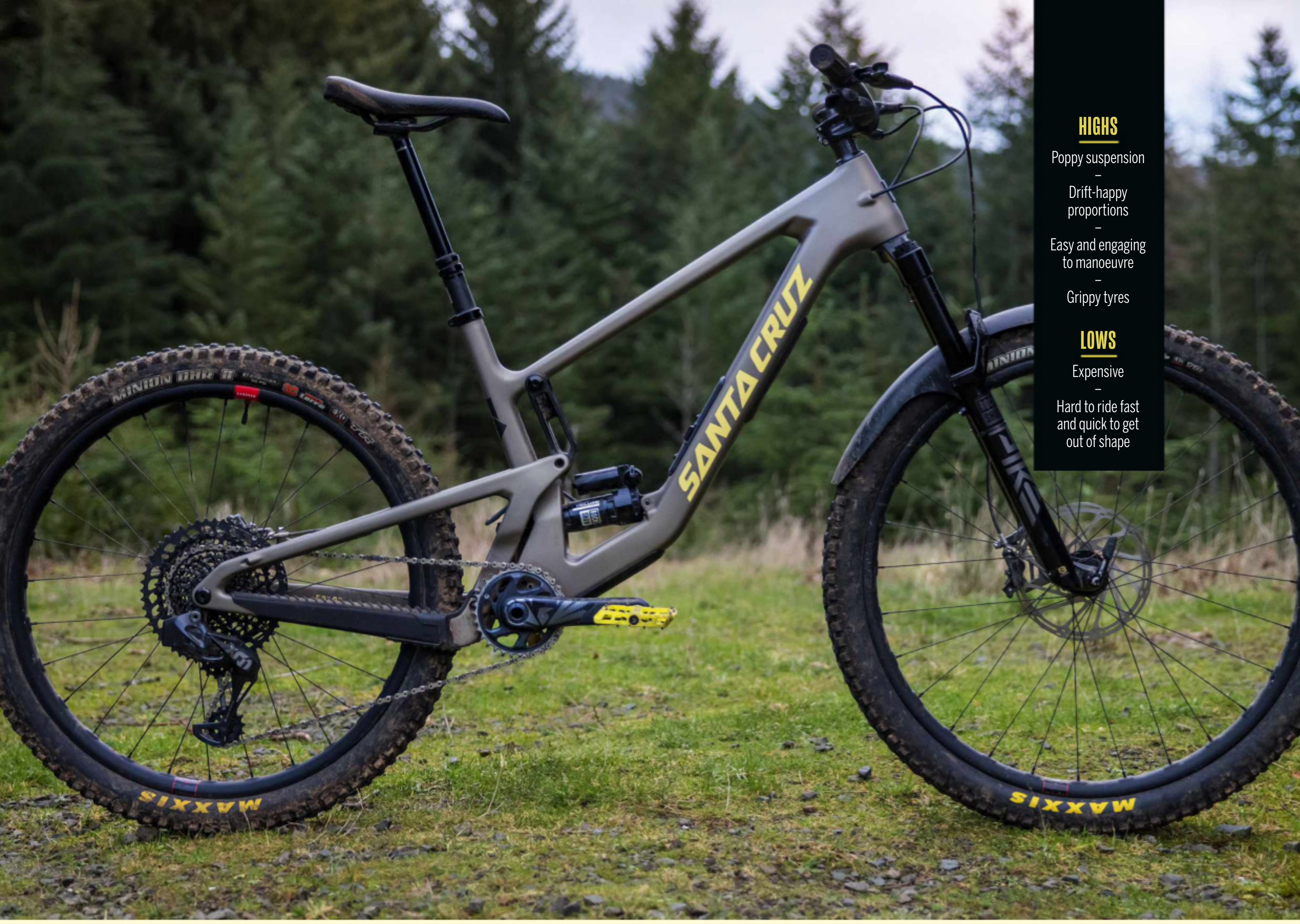
The geometry has been tweaked to suit the new wheel set-up, the aim being to give a surefooted feel without losing previous 5010s' "jump-happy, slalom turn-loving tendencies". A flip-chip on the lower link changes the head angle by 0.3 degrees (65.2-64.9 degrees) and lowers the BB height by 3mm (338mm-334mm). In the 'low' setting, our size-large bike had a 476mm reach, 1,240mm wheelbase and 76.8-degree seat tube angle.

THE KIT

Topping out the six-bike range, the CC X01 AXS RSV has a no-holds-barred build. Up front is a 140mm RockShox Pike Ultimate fork, matched with a Super Deluxe Ultimate air shock with hydraulic bottom-out control. Shifting is handled by a SRAM GX Eagle AXS-based wireless drivetrain. Continuing the SRAM theme are Guide G2 RSC brakes and a RockShox Reverb post. Santa Cruz's own Reserve 30|HD carbon rims are laced to Industry Nine 1/1 hubs and wrapped in Maxxis Minion DHR II EXO-casing rubber.

THE RIDE

Setting up the 5010 was simple, helped by Santa Cruz's online guide. We ran the recommended 29 per cent sag on the shock, left the factory-installed volume spacer in place and



HIGHS

Poppy suspension
–
Drift-happy proportions
–
Easy and engaging to manoeuvre
–
Grippy tyres

LOWS

Expensive
–
Hard to ride fast and quick to get out of shape

kept the damping adjusters open. Up front, we settled on just under 21 per cent sag, ran the high-speed compression and low-speed rebound damping open, and dialled on 7/14 clicks of low-speed compression. We preferred the low geometry setting, even though it only changes things by a few degrees/millimetres.

Seated pedalling manners are impressive, with the rear end remaining relatively static in its travel. Standing up and pushing hard creates more bob, although you can use the shock's climb lever to reduce this. The 5010 doesn't have an 'attacking' feel uphill, though. A mix of factors, including the small rear wheel, leave you sat low down, while the front end feels quite tall. This exaggerates any incline, canting your weight back. Add the seat tube angle – which is steep on paper but, in the context of the rest of the geometry, feels quite slack – and slow-rolling tyres, and it climbs more like an enduro bike than a short-travel rig. You could decrease shock sag, lower bar height, flip the chip and fit firmer tyres to counter this, but that would affect descending performance. On the plus side, the suspension soaks up beaten-up trail-centre surfaces well and provides plenty of climbing grip, helped by the sticky tyres.

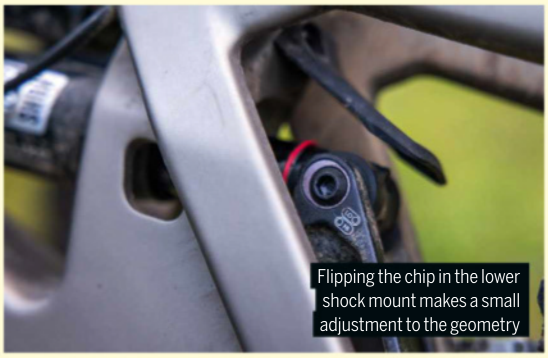
When working with gravity, the low rear and tall front end let you weight the front tyre to stick lines and rail turns without upsetting the bike's balance or getting ejected over the bars, aided by the Pike fork's bucket-loads of mid-stroke support. A side effect of this is that the rear breaks traction readily, making it easy to instigate drifts or slashes. The 5010 isn't as predictable or easy to rein in as some bigger bikes, though, and can be over-responsive to rider inputs.

Getting wild is fun and engaging on less technical terrain, but a gentle touch is required on gnarlier trails. Big hits can quickly use up the limited travel, leaving little in reserve. Over choppy ground at speed, the bike has a visceral feel. The most active portion of the suspension is gobbled up quickly, leaving you to do a lot of the heavy lifting to keep the bike on line.

Less technical trails are a blast, though. The progressive rear end and supportive fork help generate loads of pop, which makes boosting skyward or generating speed intuitive and easy. In fact, it feels closer to a jump bike than a trail bike when you're muscling it around. Riders wanting to session jumps, hit flow trails or pop and ping their way downhill are still going to love this version of the 5010. However, it lacks the diversity of a true trail bike, and the steep asking price is hard to ignore, too. **Alex**

www.santacruzbicycles.com

The down tube 'Glovebox' comes with a tube purse and tool wallet



Flipping the chip in the lower shock mount makes a small adjustment to the geometry

MBUK VERDICT

A blast on the right trails, but best suited to more sedate ascending and less gnarly downhill terrain

BMC FOURSTROKE 01 TWO

£8,800 Performance XC bike designed to shave off seconds on the race track

Swiss brand BMC's latest cross-country race machine has fresh geometry, tweaked suspension kinematics and an integrated seatpost that drops at the touch of a button. But how well does this new tech work? And, with just 100mm of rear-wheel travel on offer, how does the Fourstroke stack up against the 120mm bikes that are becoming commonplace on the XC start line?

THE FRAME

BMC say they focused largely on increasing stiffness when redesigning the Fourstroke frame. It's constructed from their premium carbon fibre, with extra volume added around the BB, to reduce torsional flex and aid power transfer. The rear triangle now has strengthening struts on both sides (before, there was only one on the non-drive side), which are claimed to increase pedalling efficiency by an astonishing 20 per cent.

BMC still use a twin-link suspension system, but the shock now sits horizontally rather than vertically. While this 'Advanced Pivot System' design is heavier than a single-pivot set-up, the brand say it gives greater traction and pedalling efficiency, resulting in a faster bike.

The frame is longer and slacker than the previous model for improved performance on steeper, faster descents, with a 477mm reach and 66.5-degree head angle on the large size we tested. But the chainstays have been kept short (429mm) to aid power transfer and agility.

BMC have added mounts for two water bottles on the down tube – ideal for marathon racers or longer rides. Internal, guided cable routing and a large port to access the Autodrop seatpost mechanism should allow for hassle-free maintenance. A small chain guide keeps the drivetrain in check, while a chainstay protector, lower-link mudflap and integrated fork stopper protect the frame and shock.

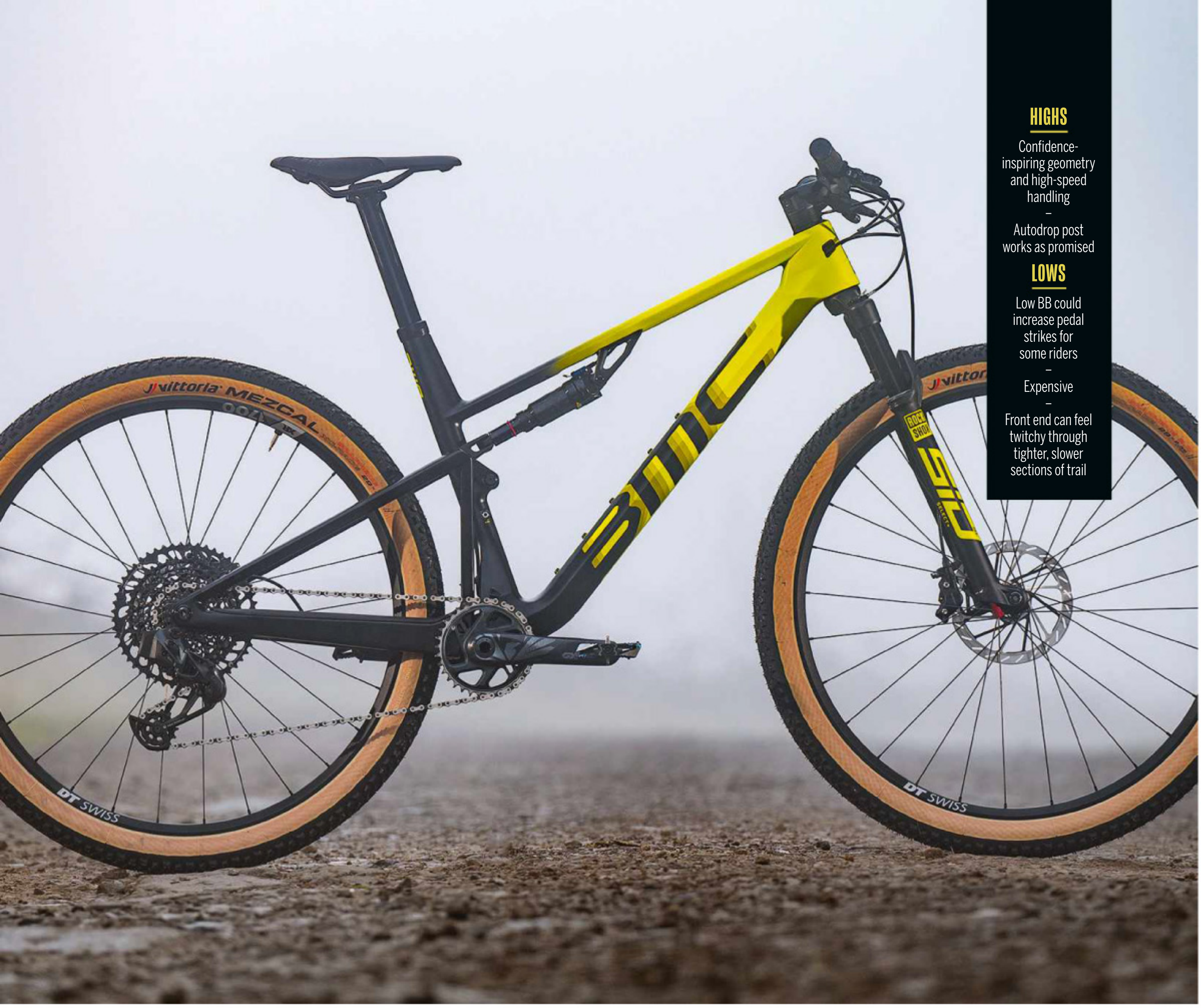
THE KIT

RockShox's race-focused SID SL Select+ fork and SIDLUXE Select+ shock contribute to the bike's light, stiff and efficient feel, and can be firmed up using a Grip Shift-activated lockout. SRAM's Level TLM brakes and GX Eagle AXS drivetrain provide sufficient stopping power and smooth wireless shifting, and the DT Swiss XR 1700 wheels are fitted with fast-rolling Vittoria Mezcal 2.35in tyres. The cockpit comprises a BMC bar and stem plus a fi'zi:k saddle.

The most notable addition for this year is the Autodrop seatpost. While other droppers extend at the touch of a button but have to be compressed by your body weight, this one drops without any downward pressure, thanks to an air tank in the down tube. BMC say this saves vital energy and time when you're between the tape. Pressurising the tank to its maximum of 14 bar (about 200psi)

SPEC

Frame 'Premium' carbon fibre, 100mm travel
Fork RockShox SID SL Select+ with TwistLoc, 100mm travel
Shock Rock Shox SIDLUXE Select+ with TwistLoc
Drivetrain SRAM GX Eagle AXS with carbon cranks (1x12)
Wheelset DT Swiss XR 1700 wheels, Vittoria Mezcal 29x2.35in tyres
Brakes SRAM Level TLM, 180/160mm rotors
Bar/stem BMC MFB01 carbon, 760mm/BMC MSM01, 60mm
Seatpost/saddle BMC Autodrop/fi:zi'k Antares R7
Weight N/A



HIGHS

Confidence-inspiring geometry and high-speed handling

–

Autodrop post works as promised

LOWS

Low BB could increase pedal strikes for some riders

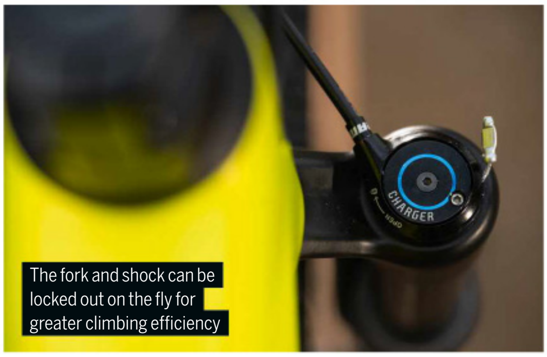
–

Expensive

–

Front end can feel twitchy through tighter, slower sections of trail

SRAM's GX Eagle AXS wireless shifting works a treat



The fork and shock can be locked out on the fly for greater climbing efficiency

should give you around 100 actuations. When the pressure drops below four bar, the post is designed to continue to work like a standard cable-operated dropper.

THE RIDE

It's hard not to smile when you throw a leg over the new Fourstroke. The bike is surprisingly capable on techy descents for a 100mm XC whippet, yet still eats up climbs for breakfast. Its handling is exceptional, the progressive geometry helping it to conquer the most technical ascents and gnarliest downhill sections.

The long front end and 760mm-wide bar allow for efficient use of your lungs, while the steep 76.7-degree seat tube angle keeps you centred over the bike and makes it easy to manoeuvre when things get technical. With 53mm of BB drop, the BMC has a low centre of gravity, which helps it feel planted and well-balanced, no matter how rowdy you get. The suspension handles impacts impressively well, and we never felt like we needed more than the 100mm of travel on offer, even on the steep, rough trails of north-east Scotland. Pointed in a straight line, this bike flies, feeling stable and giving you the confidence to point and shoot.

The low BB did cause a few pedal strikes on rocky, steep climbs and tight, rooty descents, especially towards the end of long rides, when we were starting to flag. We also found the steering a little twitchy at times, with the light front end becoming slightly overreactive when speeds decreased and the trails got tight. The Mezcal tyres performed well in the dry and held their own in the wet, though, only letting us down when conditions got sloppy.

While the Autodrop seatpost was a treat, working well and increasing confidence on descents, we did have to pump it back up on a regular basis, and ended several rides with an empty air tank. We can see the benefits for racers, though. **Rach**

www.bmc-switzerland.com

MBUK VERDICT

Refined geometry and tech make this XC bike a blast to ride on any trail

SCOTT SPARK 940

£4,299 Unique new trail all-rounder, which could have hidden potential

The 120mm-travel Spark is Scott's rapid trail all-rounder, with a distinctive hidden shock design and a decidedly more aggro slant than the race-orientated Spark RC. With price tags for the top models stretching into five figures, can the cheapest carbon bike cut it at less than half that price?

THE FRAME

Scott use their second-tier 'HMF' carbon fibre for the 940's front triangle, combined with an alloy swingarm to further keep costs down. Unusually, for an alloy rear end, this features the same weight-saving 'flex-stay' design as the pricier full-carbon Sparks, which relies on built-in flex (instead of a rear pivot) to keep the seatstays in line with the shock-actuating rocker link.

Cables are routed internally through the headset to maintain clean lines, and the BB is a press-fit BB92 unit. There's room in the front triangle for two water bottles. Four sizes are available. Our large bike had a 470mm reach and 76.4-degree seat tube angle. The head angle sits at 65.8 degrees, although this can be steepened by 0.6 degrees by rotating the angle-adjust headset cups.

SPEC

Frame 'HMF' carbon fibre mainframe, 6011 aluminium alloy swingarm, 120mm travel
Fork Rockshox Pike Select RL3, 130mm travel
Shock Rockshox Deluxe Select RL3
Drivetrain SRAM SX/NX Eagle (1x12)
Wheelset Syncros X-30SE rims on Formula hubs, Schwalbe Wicked Will Super Ground 29x2.4in tyres
Brakes Shimano MT501, 180mm rotors
Bar/stem Syncros, 760mm/Syncros, 60mm
Seatpost/saddle Syncros Duncan/Syncros Tofino 2.5
Weight 13.6kg (claimed), size large

THE KIT

Scott have cut a few corners on the spec to keep this bike under £4.5k. The drivetrain is a mix of SRAM's lower-end SX and NX Eagle groups, while the brakes are Shimano's non-series MT501s. You do get a sturdy 130mm-travel Rockshox Pike RL3 fork and smooth Deluxe Select shock, though, both hooked up to Scott's three-position TwinLoc remote lever, as is the dropper post. Along with the wheels and the rest of the finishing kit, this comes courtesy of in-house brand Syncros. Schwalbe provide the Wicked Will tyres, with their second-lightest Super Ground casing and relatively firm ADDIX SpeedGrip rubber compound.

THE RIDE

The Spark has a mixed personality that befits its blend of XC and trail characteristics. Its lightweight flex-stay rear triangle and 32-spoke wheels, combined with fast-rolling tyres, show its race-focused origins, while the Pike fork, progressive geometry and stiff carbon front end give it a muscular feel closer to that of a trail bike. This should make it the best of both worlds, but flaws in the spec leave it compromised on both fronts.

While the tyres roll quickly, the suspension bobs if the damping is left open, so you're reliant on the middle 'Traction' mode of the TwinLoc system to maintain efficiency on smoother climbs. It does scramble up looser, more technical ascents well, though. On the way back down, the Spark is a fun and engaging bike to ride on flow trails and copes well enough in chunkier terrain, with the stiff, controlled Pike fork being a particular highlight of the spec.

However, the MT501 brakes have only two pistons and resin-pad-only rotors, seriously reducing stopping power, and the Schwalbe Wicked Will feels undergunned for front use, its lack of grip undermining control and confidence. The dropper portion of the TwinLoc lever is also awkward to use, making it more difficult to drop the post in a hurry. A beefier brake set-up, grippier front tyre and more ergonomic remote would unlock this bike's full potential and really help it spark into life. **Tom Law**

www.scott-sports.com

MBUK VERDICT

Impressive frame with capable geometry and suspension, but crying out for better brakes and front tyre

1

THE HOTTEST NEW KIT

FIRST LOOK

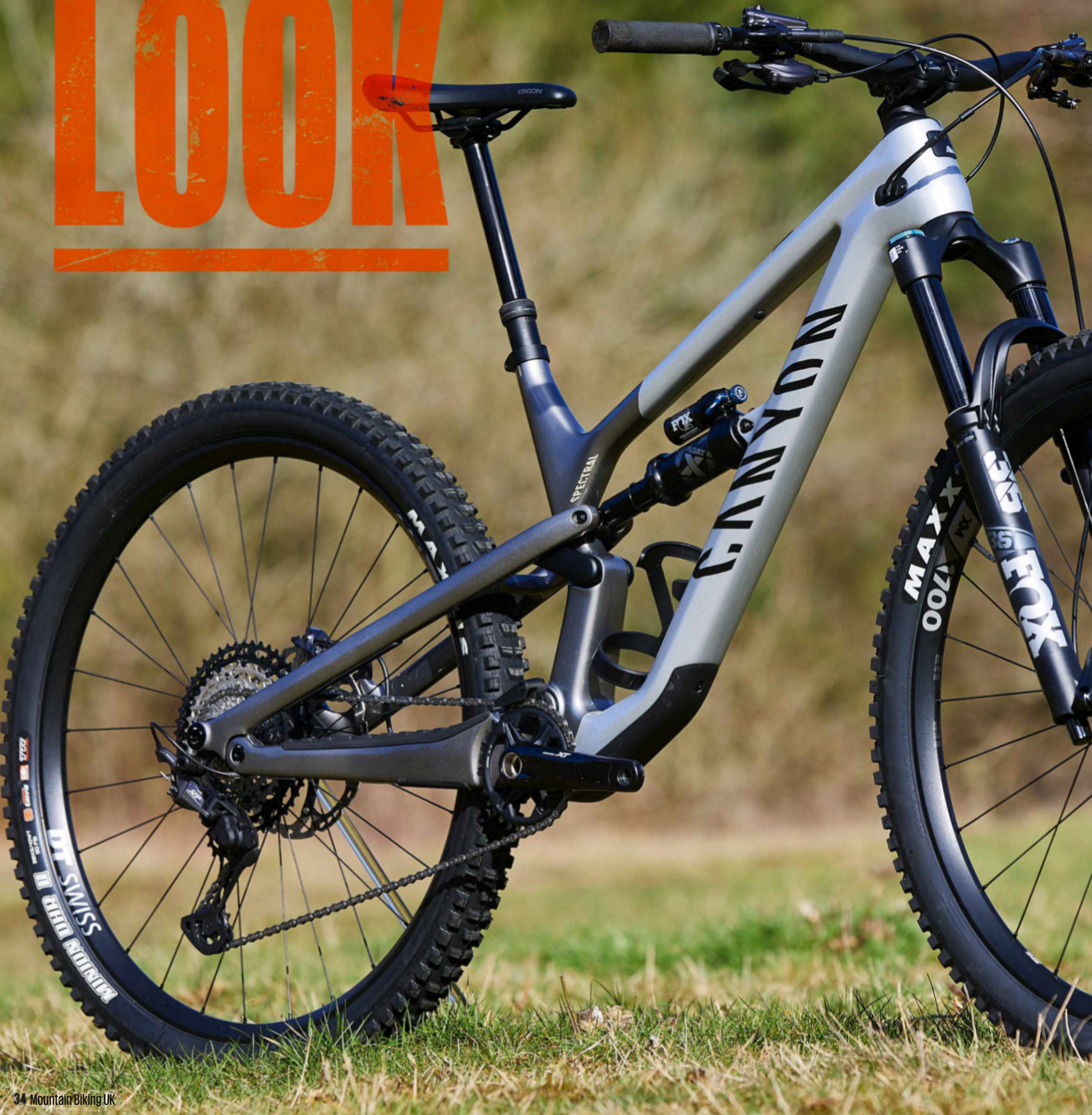
CANYON SPECTRAL CF 8 KIS

£4,799 (+ shipping) The ultimate in straight-line stability?

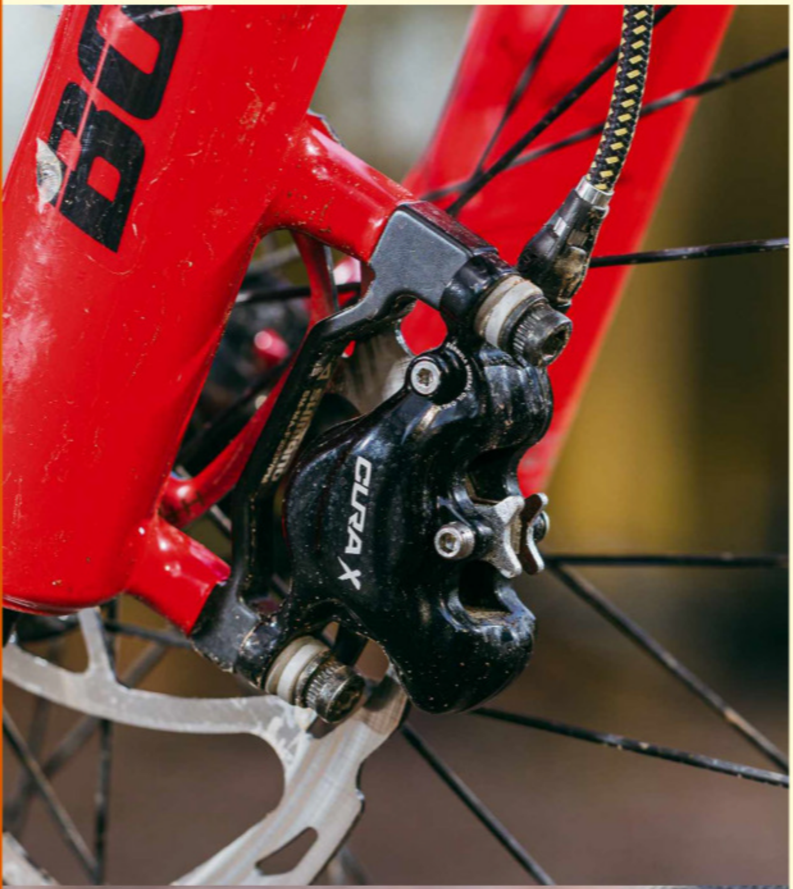
German direct-sale giants Canyon have partnered with Jo Klieber – the man behind Syntace components and Liteville bikes – to bring us self-centring steering technology.

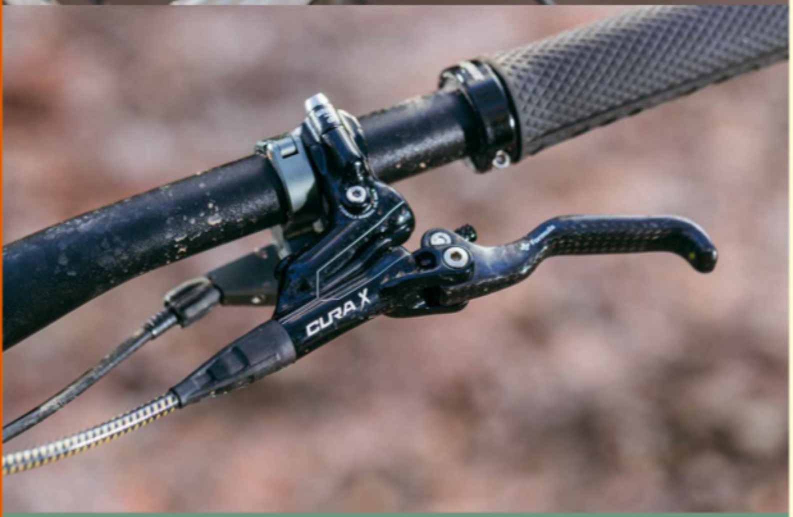
Their KIS (Keep It Stable) system is designed to actively centre the handlebar, to reduce twitchiness and deliver a more composed ride, whether climbing or descending. Adding a claimed 110g to the weight of a bike, it works using a spring housed in the top tube and can be adjusted for rider style, weight and terrain.

KIS is currently available on just one bike – this 150mm-travel



enduro rig, which sports some similarly terrain-taming parts, including a Performance Elite-level Fox 36 fork and Float X shock, Shimano Deore XT shifting and brakes, and DT Swiss XM 1700 29er wheels shod with Maxxis Minion tyres.
www.canyon.com





FORMULA CURA X BRAKES

£250 Luxury XC stopping power

These enhanced anchors are claimed to weigh 34g less than Formula's standard Curas, yet to offer the same high level of braking performance.

Gram-shaving measures include a carbon fibre lever blade (with toolless adjustments), braided Kevlar hose, titanium hardware and alloy-backed pads. With two 24mm pistons, the calliper should provide ample stopping power for cross-country and trail riding.

You can upgrade to Formula's Speed Lock tech – designed to let you dis-/reconnect the hose with no air ingress or fluid loss – and their SRAM/Shimano-compatible MixMaster bar clamp. Colour choices are gloss black, polished silver or gold. The brakes weigh a claimed 325g per end.
www.elro.uk

RACE FACE ERA CRANKSET

£499 (arms only) A new Era of enduro cranks?

Race Face say the Eras are their strongest, stiffest and most durable carbon fibre cranks to date – and they back up these claims with a lifetime warranty.

These gains are said to come largely from the threaded-alloy pedal inserts being bonded to the carbon during the lay-up process, instead of being installed afterwards.

The Eras are available in seven colours and three arm lengths (165/170/175mm). With a claimed weight of 483g (170mm, 32t), they look to be 12g or so lighter than Race Face's current enduro cranks, the Next Rs. That's despite the addition of a stainless-steel plate, designed to prevent foot rub from wearing through the layers of carbon. *www.silverfish-uk.com*

RACEFACE
ERA
CINCH
RACEFACE

ODI REFLEX V2.1 GRIPS

£27.99 Will buying grips be a Reflex action?

Designed based on feedback from riders – from elite racers to weekend rippers – ODI's latest grips are made from a rubber compound that's claimed to offer superior impact damping. A soft, ribbed thumb area is combined with a padded top section with angled pads, designed to allow a natural hand position. Underneath is a waffle pattern, intended to help absorb vibrations and impacts, and boost comfort. The result, ODI reckon, is a set of grips that offers optimal feedback and control, while reducing fatigue and arm pump. The Reflex Grips are 135mm long, with a single lock-on clamp and reinforced ends. They're available in two diameters and nine colours. *www.freewheel.co.uk*

ADVERTISING FEATURE

LIVE UNCAGED

BACK TO THEIR GRASSROOTS

WE FIND OUT HOW YT INDUSTRIES ARE HELPING TO GET UK RIDERS STOKED ON ENDURO RACING

Enduro racing is a great way to test your limits while riding with friends, requiring you to explore new places, climb for hours, shred down trails you've never ridden before, make quick decisions on the fly and provide support for each other when the going gets tough. It's grown into a fully-fledged global sport with its own world series, attracting the highest-performing athletes and cutting-edge development from manufacturers. Everyone has to start somewhere, though, and for most that's their local or regional race series – aka the grassroots level.

This is where YT Industries come in. They haven't forgotten their roots supporting Young Talent and know that, while any type of riding is a buzz with the right bike, there's nothing quite like the accomplishment of completing a big day in the saddle and having a cold one with your mates after. Or smashing that target on the results sheet, if you're into that.

Famous for providing high performance on the trail for an affordable price, racing is part of the brand's DNA, from the past successes of the YT MOB downhill team through to the new generation of MOB launched this year to tackle the Enduro World Cup. Now, they're taking things a step further and supporting the TweedLove Triple Crown Enduro series and Southern Enduro Championships for 2023, in a big boost for UK grassroots racing.

"We'll be providing our full Rolling Circus set-up at these events, giving everyone the chance to experience the brand first-hand," they explain. "Whether that's by demoing the latest bikes or stopping by for a drink and a chat, it's a great opportunity to become part of the YT family." ✪

COME AND MEET US!

YT INDUSTRIES TRIPLE CROWN ENDURO SERIES 2023

ROUND 1
29-30 APRIL
Tweed Valley, Scotland

ROUND 2
20-21 MAY
Kinlochleven, Scotland

ROUND 3
30 SEPT-1 OCT
Tweed Valley, Scotland

2023 YT INDUSTRIES SOUTHERN ENDURO CHAMPS

AUGUST 4-6
Minehead, Somerset, England

BOOK YOUR DEMO AT THESE OR OTHER EVENTS BY SCANNING THE QR CODE BELOW:

REYNOLDS BLACKLABEL 329 TRAIL PRO WHEELS

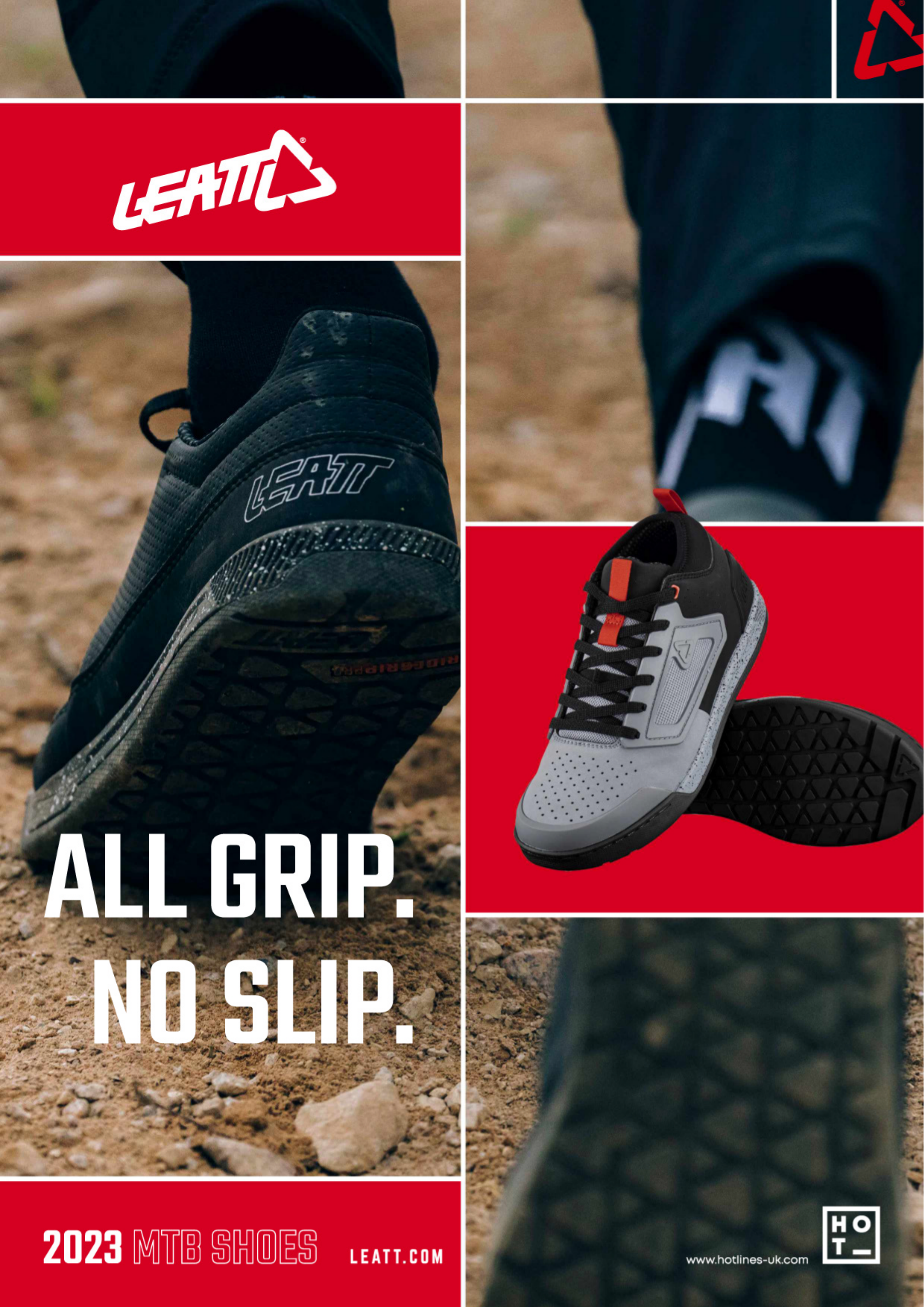
£2,200 Pricey performance hoops

These wheels from Reynolds' premium Blacklabel range use the US brand's own MR5 carbon fibre rims, laced to top-quality Industry Nine Hydra hubs with stainless-steel Sapim CX-Ray spokes. They're available in both 29in (here) and 650b diameters.

Reynolds claim the Trail Pros provide "ultimate durability, riding comfort and trail-hugging traction", thanks to careful consideration of rim width (32mm, internal), depth (19mm) and carbon lay-up. The rim is asymmetric, to allow more even spoke tension, and hookless, to aid tyre fit and inflation.

As you'd hope for the price, these wheels come with a lifetime warranty. SRAM XD and Shimano Microspline freehub bodies are included, with a Shimano HG option also available. If you're feeling flush but not *that* flush, You can get the same rims on SUNringlé hubs for £400 less. *www.upgradebikes.co.uk*

REYNOLDS
CYCLING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David **TRUMMER**

RACING NEVER ENDS

The downhill season never ends. The World Cup tracks may be silent, and you might not find any tyre marks on the ground, but when our **SUMMUM CARBON** isn't wearing its race-plate it's only because we're out training hard. Always. Because Mondraker's winning genetics never rest. *Just like racing.*

MORE INFO

MONDRAKER.COM

THE BEST TRAILS, RIDERS AND TECH FEATURES, IN DEPTH

GOING DEEP

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TRAILS BY RAIL
ADVENTURER DAN MILNER USES A VICTORIAN-ERA RAILWAY TO CONNECT INDIA'S BEST TRAILS

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Rachel heads to the Lakes for a spring mission – and gets buried in snow

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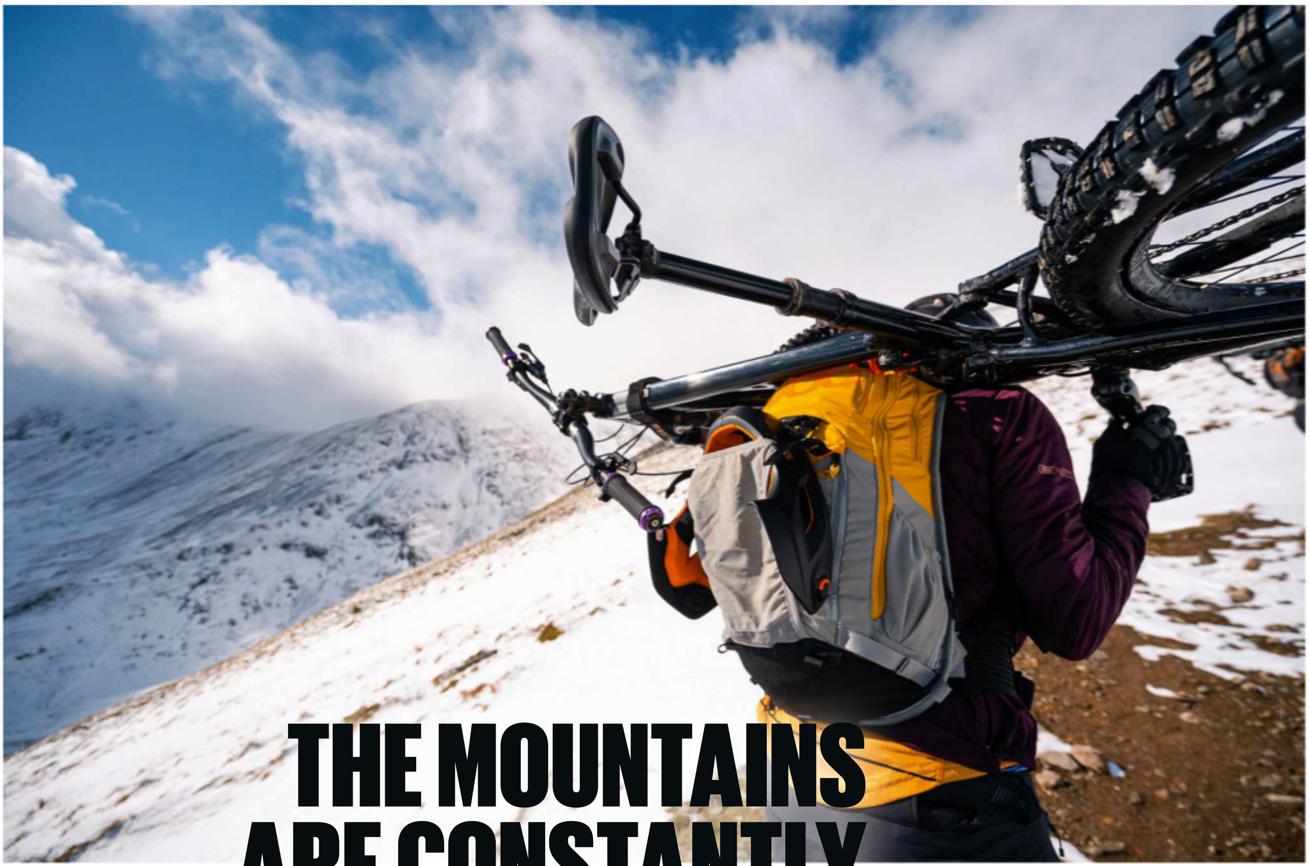
Investigating the mountain biking potential of Saudi Arabia

A MOUNTAIN TO SATISFY A CRAVING

WHEN OUR RACH PLANNED A TRIP TO THE LAKES, SHE WASN'T EXPECTING TO GET QUITE THIS MUCH OF AN MTB FIX

Words Rachel Bennet **Pics** James Vincent

IN ASSOCIATION WITH



THE MOUNTAINS ARE CONSTANTLY CALLING ME,

enticing me with their grandeur and breathtaking beauty. They put me at ease in this topsy-turvy world and do wonders for my mental health. So, when I was tasked with putting MET's Parachute MCR convertible helmet through its paces, I knew exactly where I was heading. With a general plan to bag as many peaks as possible, and access issues counting out the Welsh mountains, I cast my sights further north.

As a Scot, I don't know much about the Lake District, but I do know the mountains there are scattered with jagged rocks and big boulders, so I was glad to be tackling this terrain with the protection of a full-face lid. I roped in my mate Issy to accompany me – adventures are better with friends, right? She was one of the first people I'd ridden with down in *MBUK*'s hometown of Bristol, and her personality and riding style match my own, so I knew she'd be up for this mission.

HAVE I GOT IT IN ME?

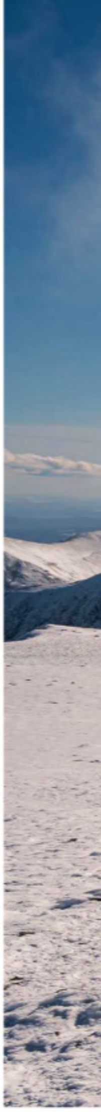
With this being my first big trip away for the mag, it's fair to say I was a little apprehensive. All the planning involved was daunting, and then there was the pressure to meet the brief. However, it wasn't until snapper James Vincent asked whether I'd be OK with hike-a-bike that I questioned whether I'd even be able to complete the ride. James had done his research, was aware of my past back injury and – rightly so – wanted to make sure I was up for lugging an enduro bike on my shoulders. "I'll be fine," I told him, but it was on my mind. Would I? "Ach weel, it adds another dimension to the challenge," I reasoned with myself – and I love a challenge!

We pushed the date back, in the hope that the conditions would be clear, spring-like and enticing – but fate had other ideas. A cold front swept across the UK, bringing snow, sleet and minus temperatures. With just a two-day window in which to do the ride, James and I were weather-watching all week – one of the joys of doing anything in the mountains! Right up until the last minute, we weren't sure which day and route would be best and safest, or even if the ride would go ahead at all. After several anxious phone calls and email conversations, we decided to go for it, albeit with a change

Top There was no shortage of hike-a-bike on the ascent up Helvellyn

Middle Deep powder snow made for some seriously heavy going

Bottom Heading into the mountains, with an azure sky and fresh snow – perfect!



of plans. Instead of trying to scale multiple summits, we'd focus on just the one. After all, that would be tough enough in these conditions, which would definitely test the mettle of the MET helmet.

SNOW SHOW

Nestled on the southern banks of Ullswater and caressed by snowy peaks, Glenridding sat dwarfed by its magnificent surroundings. This wasn't what I'd expected of the Lakes in March – or any time of year, for that matter. There was no sign of James. I did a quick spin around the car park and checked my phone. One message: "You guys OK?" Had I got the wrong car park? In fact, it was the right place, I just lacked the local knowledge of the free parking in the area.

The sun was out and the mountains stood proud in front of us. Our plan was to ride up Sticks Pass, traverse the ridge to Helvellyn's summit and descend Dollywaggen Pike to Grizedale Tarn, exiting the mountains following Grizedale Beck. James questioned whether we still wanted to go ahead with this tough route, reasoning that we could just play it safe and do a lower loop with some techy sections and an impressive backdrop. But I'm a mountain girl, the weather looked stable and James was confident the higher-level ride would be doable today, so it was a no-brainer. I'd come to the Lakes for an epic ride and to reconnect with the mountains, so that was what we were going to do. We adjusted our equipment for a big day out, strapped the chinbars of our MET helmets to our packs and hit the road towards the Helvellyn youth hostel.

After meandering past a few houses, we were soon on a snowy track heading towards the mountains. The compact snow was surprisingly grippy, I was feeling fresh and we all got to chatting, full of excitement for a day in the mountains. Beyond the buildings of the youth hostel, the path started to get considerably snowier and I could tell James was a little concerned. On more than one occasion we considered turning back. "Let's see what it's like around the next corner," was our usual line, until we finally committed – a decision we didn't regret.

Early in the ride, James decided against Sticks Pass, so we took the 4x4 track that winds up Keppel Cove to the ridgeline instead. The snow had drifted, making for an arduous climb, and at times we had to wade through waist-deep snow. Issy and James had their bikes up on their shoulders ploughing through the drifts behind me. I opted to push my Saracen Ariel 60, because I was apprehensive about putting my back out. I'm faster when pushing, anyway, and was making good ground as I led the way up.

PUSH IT REAL GOOD

We soon reached some deep drifted sections where pushing would've been daft. With some tips from James, I hoisted my

Above Navigating the ridgeline, with views for miles across the Lakes

Below Our MET Parachute MCR helmets were extremely useful, with the detachable chin guard proving easy to fit for technical or downhill sections, even with iced-up fingers

THE WIND HAD SCOURED THE GROUND, LITTERING THE MOUNTAINTOP WITH BROWN VOLCANIC ROCK

Above This section of uninterrupted singletrack across the ridge was a highlight

bike up on to my shoulder. With one foot in front of the other, I stumbled forward. Did I notice the strain on my back? Yes. Was it a cause for concern? No. I kept my core engaged and fired up the correct muscles so my spine wouldn't be left to take up the slack. I could do this! Once past the numerous switchbacks, it was a straight track to the ridgeline. I dumped the bike off my shoulders and began the push. With the sun beating down on our backs, we enjoyed the amazing views the Lakes were treating us to, and I was in my element.

CHIN UP

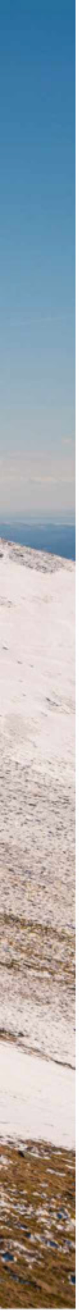
As we reached the ridgeline, we could see Helvellyn standing proudly to our left. Some walkers had taken advantage of the break in the weather and were enjoying the bluebird day, and at the first cairn, I stopped to chat to a snowboarder who'd hiked up to catch some fresh lines on a neighbouring slope. Pushing on, I'll admit I felt a little jealous of his chosen mode of transport.

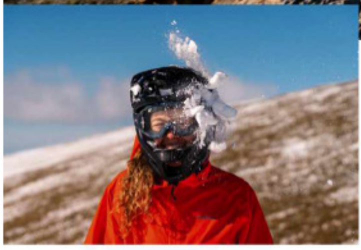
A stiff wind forced us to get our jackets on and, with a short descent to navigate before the final hike-a-bike to the summit, we thought it best to put the chinbars on our MET Parachute helmets. The magnetic fixings made these easy to attach, even though our hands were starting to feel the wind chill. We waited at the top for James to get into position and then, with big smiles on our faces, dropped in for a short, fast and loose descent. Having never ridden in the Lakes before, I was acutely aware of how sharp the rocks that scattered our path were. I tried to ride conservatively and choose a line that wouldn't slice a tyre and take this epic in a whole new direction. This first descent was short-lived, and we were soon back on the climb. Issy and I debated whether to remove our chinbars, but were both thankful for the extra warmth they gave as the wind battered against our faces and brought pain to our extremities.

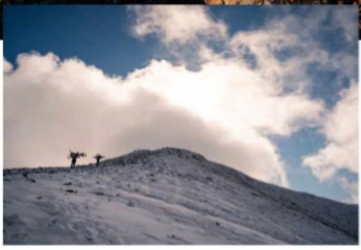
THE SUM OF IT

With frames on our shoulders once more, we trudged on, heads down and focused on each footfall. This wouldn't be the time to stumble or miss a step! Thankfully, we made it to the next ridgeline, which would take us to the summit. At that moment, the clouds cleared, revealing a stunning backdrop of snowy peaks stretching out for miles, with the Irish Sea on the horizon. James instructed us to get the bikes back on our shoulders and retrace our steps for his camera.

After a quick bite to eat, we pushed on to the summit. The wind had scoured the ground, littering the white mountaintop with brown volcanic rock, reminding us of what lay beneath our tyres. Light clouds drifted past at a fair lick, revealing bright blue sky and snow-covered peaks before shrouding us in a grey cloak, making it hard to see the path ahead. The crisp wind felt invigorating and the awe-inspiring view made my heart full. How I'd missed this environment –







and who'd have thought that England would be the place to give a Scottish girl her fix?

At the top, we took great delight in chucking our bikes in the snow and hoping they'd stay up long enough to get the obligatory summit shot. We all managed it – the powder was deep! This was prime snow, too, not the wet, slushy type we had in Bristol or the icy, harsh stuff we often get in Scotland. It was perfect for snowballs – as Issy later found out!

SNOW AND ROCK

From the summit, we descended on loose singletrack that snaked its way to Dollywaggan Pike. The rough mountain grasses were a stark contrast with the pure-white snow and perfect blue sky. You'd have been forgiven for thinking we were on an alpine adventure, judging by the views we were being treated to. Dropping into the descent required full focus. The manmade mountain path of chunky rocks and

Clockwise from top
The janky descent to Grizedale Tarn required full focus

Ascending into the clouds, bikes on shoulders

Snapper James bags the obligatory summit shot

The snowdrifts rarely let up, even when descending

Issy gets caught off-guard by a wayward snowball

MET
PARACHUTE

MET PARACHUTE MCR HELMET

MET provided Issy and me with their latest convertible enduro helmet, the Parachute MCR. A clever magnetic release system developed with FIDLOCK lets you remove the chinbar. This meant we were able to climb with plenty of ventilation, then reattach the chinbar to descend with confidence. The lid is fully downhill-certified in full-face form, and features MIPS tech, a Boa cradle and 21 vents for maximum airflow. For full details, visit *www.met-helmets.com*.

Where are we?

The Lake District, in North West England, is the largest National Park in the country, at 2,362km^2. Our chosen mountain was Helvellyn, the Lakes' third-highest peak, at 950m (3,114ft). From Glenridding, on the banks of Ullswater, a 4x4 track takes you up past the YHA hostel, before mountain paths lead up to the ridgeline and on to the summit. The climb takes two to three hours, depending on your fitness and the conditions. Allow 45 minutes to two hours to get back down, depending on how hard you're pinning it!

Top At times, Issy and I felt like we were back in the Alps doing the Megavalanche!

Above Feeling very small, yet completely at peace, high in the mountains

drainage culverts made for a techy trail, and drifting snow and icy rocks added extra excitement. At times, it felt like we were taking part in the infamous Megavalanche on the snow-blasted slopes of Alpe d'Huez, as we tripod-ed our way down, before having to dismount and navigate huge drifts. Each time we found a section of the trail that was properly ridable, big grins were soon plastered across our faces. This was why I started mountain biking – the thrill of a gnarly trail with glorious backdrops, out in the wilderness. You can keep your smooth berms and busy bike parks; this is what makes me feel alive.

It would be a lie to say that Issy and I felt at home on this terrain, which was a far cry from the steep forest trails we're used to, but we were both loving it. Often having to start from a trackstand straight into a techy rock section was hard on the nerves and really pushed our skills. Each time I nailed a bit of trail, that lovely feeling of accomplishment washed over me and made me want more. I'll always be scared of chunky gnar, but when you get through a section you had doubts about, it's one of the best feelings in the world. My biggest weakness is lack of confidence, especially when it comes to riding. I have commitment issues, some might say, but I really needed to commit up here on the side of Helvellyn. These big volcanic rocks take no prisoners and momentum is your friend. Commit I did, and it felt great. Let's just say I was grateful for the full-face coverage here.

We made it down to Grizedale Tarn unscathed and had a wee snack break in a sheltered spot, where I wolfed down my last cheese and pickle sarnie. A rocky section of trail stretched out in front of us, which was all ridable – at least until it disappeared around the corner. There were so many line choices that I walked part of this section, analysing which was the best route to give me a flowy run while staying rubber-side-down. I settled on a wide run into a drop, which landed me on a patch of snow and then sent me into shark-fin rocks clawing upwards from the snow. I navigated these with precision and grace – in my head, at least! The stoke was high.

THE WAY OUT

As we rounded the corner, our hearts sank – the track had been filled in by a snowdrift. After such a buzz, this knocked the wind out of us. It was now 4pm and we were over pushing our bikes. I could tell that James, in particular, was frustrated that we couldn't ride large portions of the descent. He knew what lay beneath, the glorious singletrack we could have been shredding, whereas Issy and I had only our imagination to go on. We were both riding high on just being there, in the mountains. It didn't matter much to us that the descent was broken up.

As we reached a wee shepherd's hut, I could see the path winding around the corner, snow banked up against the

I NEEDED TO COMMIT UP ON THE SIDE OF HELVELLYN. THESE VOLCANIC ROCKS TAKE NO PRISONERS AND MOMENTUM IS YOUR FRIEND. COMMIT I DID, AND IT FELT GREAT

hillside but with a slim line of ridable track meandering its way along the contours of the land. We decided that now would be a good time to revert to half-shell lids. With goggles and chinbars safely stowed in our packs, we hit the snowy track. Dusk was drawing in now, the sun had dropped behind the mountains and our path lay in shadow. As it wound down the valley, roughly following the river that had carved it out many years ago, we reached a bridge and our spirits were lifted, because we could pedal rather than trudge along this final part.

On the valley road back into Glenridding, I reflected on our day in the mountains. Issy and I had challenged our riding skills and bodies (mine in particular!), and come out unharmed, with plenty more left in the tank. The route James had planned for us had been breathtaking, providing a good mix of climbs, singletrack traverses and technical descents, which required precision and guts to make it down in one piece. Our versatile MET helmets had proven their worth, as had my Saracen's 160mm of travel. Issy and I would be coming back to the Lakes, that was for sure!

Clockwise from top left Sarah's all smiles, buried within her lid and goggles

With chinbars safely attached to packs, it was time to pedal back to the car

The crew finally arrive back in Glenridding, ready for the post-ride beer

Job done! Riding along the valley floor after a seriously big mission

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TRAILS BY RAIL

ADVENTURER DAN MILNER USES A VICTORIAN-ERA RAILWAY LINE TO ACCESS SOME OF INDIA'S WILDEST MTB TRAILS

Words & photos Dan Milner

Taking the DHR up into the mountains was like stepping back into a bygone era

This Himalayan Epic tour justifies its name in all respects

THE DESCENT IS SLICK WITH GREEN MOSS AND TUNNELLED BY UNCOMPROMISING, STIFF BAMBOO, AND BEGS FOR STICKIER TYRES AND A NARROWER BAR

On one single intense trail we went from high, frosty peaks to humid bamboo forest

“**We saw a tiger** up here once,” says our guide, Mike McLean, as if recounting a trip to the corner shop. I peer anxiously at the screen of impenetrable bamboo that shrouds our trail and realise that anything – a cow, a tiger, even a unicorn – could be hungrily fixing me in its gaze and I’d never know. Until now, my concern has been how to carry our bikes on a tiny, 141-year-old Indian railway, but now the tigers have superseded that. Thanks for changing the mood, Mike.

Doing the locomotion

Resigning myself to fate is usually the norm on my adventures, so I launch into the arching undergrowth. The descent is slick with green moss and tunnelled by uncompromising, stiff bamboo, and begs for stickier tyres and a narrower bar. Any ideas I had of finding effortless flow are abandoned to the chaos of a riotous slide, but at least my worries of tiger encounters are quickly forgotten.

Twenty minutes later we emerge in a clearing, below strings of prayer flags that sway silently in the breeze. I can make out the sounds of human activity, disembodied in a thick mist – traffic noise and drifting music, a grinding disc at work, and then the horn of a train, unmistakable in its shrill insistence. This isn’t just a train horn but also the sound of triumph; the sound of a railway line built in 1881 and still stubbornly clinging to survival in the age of the car. The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, or DHR.

It’s this curious, UNESCO World Heritage railway line that’s lured German rider Steffi Marth, Indian freerider Vinay Menon and yours truly to the country’s remote north-east. Our aim is to use it as our mechanised uplift, to reach trails around its terminus, Darjeeling, the historic tea-plantation town and gateway to the soaring peaks and ridgetop trails of Singalila National Park. We have a lot to squeeze into just eight days.

Rewind four of those days, and we’re boarding the DHR amid the chaos of Jalpaiguri, a town on West Bengal’s lowland plain beset by stifling humidity and nagging mosquitoes. Here, on a narrow, 67cm-gauge track, two short carriages sit hitched to a diesel locomotive – itself not much bigger than a VW Transporter van – that oozes oil and character with equal enthusiasm. Electric-blue paint has been layered over dents and rust, and thick grime coats the driver’s cab. A large rock sits wedged onto the engine’s footplate; given that we’re about to trust our lives to a train that regularly derails, on a line that’s been repeatedly closed by landslides, I decide it’s best not to enquire about its role.

It takes our train five hours to cover the mere 46km, 1,300m ascent to Kurseong, our first planned overnight stop. The steep climb repeatedly forces the railway line to zigzag up the mountainside in a series of switchbacks. I get the idea that the speed of the DHR hasn’t changed much since it first crawled to Darjeeling in 1881, which would be frustrating, if the view wasn’t a constant distraction. We peer out across plunging valleys and into a jungle canopy rustling with monkeys, and at times look straight into the eyes of shopkeepers, who stand by stalls built perilously close to the passing train.

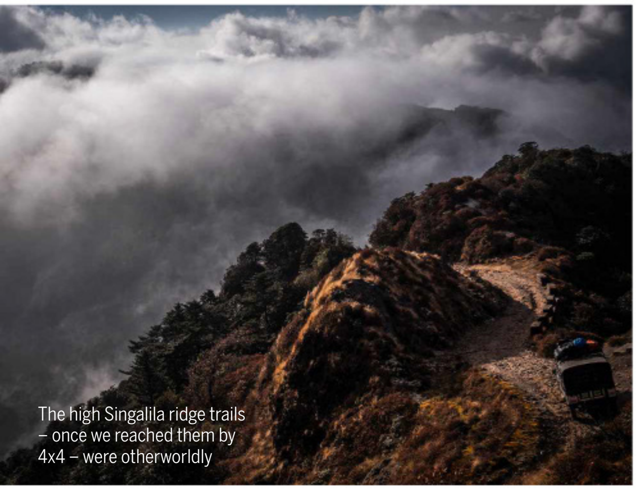
Time for tea

The glacial pace of our uplift contrasts hugely with the frantic energy of our first ride in Kurseong. We race to and fro across a vivid green carpet of tea plants, our tyres crunching on dusty gravel as we spiral down into a valley that’s quickly sliding into dusky shadows. Our antics are watched by basket-wielding tea-pickers. “Be careful,” says one, visibly concerned at our apparent risk taking, “the path is not very big.”

We bookend two rides near Kurseong with nights in an old, rambling hotel, once home to the local colonial magistrate. Its creaking floors hum with linseed oil and its corridors still echo the atmosphere of the occupying British empire that came to these hills to escape the summer heat of Kolkata [then called Calcutta]. Just outside the doors sit two decrepit Land Rovers – further remnants of a bygone era whose legacy is everywhere. When we finally arrive in Darjeeling a day later, after another four-hour ride on the DHR, we pull up alongside wheezing steam locomotives almost a century old. These smoke-belching relics still ply

HOW AND WHEN: TRAVELLING BY THE DHR

A journey on the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is a real experience. Taking a bike is possible, but takes some planning. We found that pre-booking seats for bikes in bike bags was a viable way to use the service (trying to board with unreserved, unbagged bikes proved problematic). Mike offers a fully-supported trip in October that encompasses the best of the area’s singletrack, along with overnights in Darjeeling should you want to experience the amazing DHR train. See *https://mountainbikekerala.com* for more details of this and his other Indian bike trips. A 120mm to 150mm-travel trail bike is perfect. You can expect warm days and cold nights. A visa to enter India is needed for most foreign visitors.



The high Singalila ridge trails – once we reached them by 4x4 – were otherworldly

the line daily and, although the railway's original tea-shipping role has been replaced by tourism, there's still a strong sense of pride among the workers running things here. When I wander through the train shed the next morning, I watch them wrench bolts, open steamy valves and heave baskets of coal towards gaping, fiery furnaces. All have a smile to share.

> I WATCH THEM HEAVE BASKETS OF COAL TOWARDS GAPING, FIERY FURNACES. ALL HAVE A SMILE TO SHARE

Steam dreams

The DHR may be a tourist magnet, (likely helped by Wes Anderson's 2007 film *The Darjeeling Limited*, which was actually filmed on a different railway 2,000km away), but Darjeeling is best known for its tea. Trails, it seems, don't get a mention, but there are plenty. Our slick tiger-dodging descent is just one, as is another we ride in a nearby forest. Here, deep in swirling mist, we weave down a loamy trail between stout pines, each as fat as a ship's funnel and as tall as a 50,000-volt pylon. After each ride, the town's crumbling colonial facades, barking dogs and cold beers await, as do the views. Looking out from its station, past steaming engines and selfie-snapping tourists, beyond hills blanketed in tea plantations, lies the muscled outline of Kangchenjunga. This 8,586m-high monster is to become the backdrop to the next set of trails we ride.

We leave Darjeeling on the DHR, jumping off at Ghoom to switch to a couple of '50s Land Rovers for an arduous onward drive to the Singalila National Park. The single road into the park is steep, loose and rough, and our progress is as painfully slow as it was on the DHR. As our vehicles lurch forwards, their tyres spitting head-sized rocks off the narrow, exposed track and into the abyss to the side, I find myself missing the relative smoothness of the railway. "You must know every rock," I say to our driver, Tenzing Sherpa. "Every rock knows me!" he laughs back. Tenzing has lost count of the times he's driven this road.

Our destination is his home village, Sandakphu, a tiny frontier settlement sitting at 3,600m, which becomes our base for exploring the Singalila ridge. We pedal out on ancient flagstones, gasping for breath in the thin air as we climb through thick rhododendron forest to traverse vast hillsides ablaze with golden autumn grass. Returning to our guesthouse, we're served steamed *momos* (Tibetan dumplings) in the relative warmth of its dining room. Just beyond its windows, yaks roam under a full moon, their snorts condensing in the freezing air to steam skywards like curls of smoke from steam trains. At night we slide into our sleeping bags, and pull two blankets on top for extra warmth. The sweaty heat of the lowlands already seems a lifetime ago.

From yaks to banana trees

The trail we ride meanders along the broad Singalila ridge, diving on and off the 4x4 track to tiptoe along the Nepal-India border. While this is patrolled, there is little, if anything, to demark it. This is Gorkha land, a place where cross-border shared cultural and ethnic bonds are stronger than frontier divisions. When our Singalila park guide, Phupu Tshering Vhutia, serves chickpea-and-potato curry from an insulated pot at a mid-ride picnic lunch, I ask him whether he identifies as Gorkha or Indian, he smiles. "Gorkha," he says without hesitation.

The further north along the ridge we ride, the more remote it feels and the more imposing the backdrop of Himalayan peaks. Phupu points out the towering forms of Makalu, Lhotse and Everest, a jagged tear in the seam between land and sky. This is a landscape to make you feel small, a feeling reinforced by our final descent as we start our return to Darjeeling, and ultimately back to the lowlands. We launch into 2,000 vertical metres of gravity pull, and for the next 90 minutes carve around swooping bends on narrow singletrack and pump wheels over tangled roots and through burbling streams. It's intense riding.

About halfway down, the heat rises and I realise that this one trail is quickly becoming a synonym for our whole trip – a simple line on a map leading us through a constantly changing landscape, on a journey of new experiences. Starting among yaks and prayer flags on a barren frost-shrouded peak and finishing among vines, bamboo and banana trees, the descent mirrors the enormous diversity that's accompanied every leg of our eight-day journey. From colonial artefacts, tea factories and old, steaming engineering triumphs to prayer flags and hidden tigers, each is a unique chapter of that journey, but all are connected by one thing – simple lines in the dirt, whether trails or railway tracks. ✪

The world's highest mountains make up quite a backdrop

We passed remote villages and yaks on sublime trails strewn with prayer flags

Our trusty uplift was a 1950s Land Rover

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JUST AN ILLUSION

An eye-opening MTB journey through Saudi Arabia brings extraordinary sensory experiences – but can you find the Arabian Nights of our imagination in the real Middle East?

Words & pics Martin Bissig

RUMBLING AND CHURNING, THE CLIMATE GENERATORS PUMP COLD AIR INTO THE SCORCHING DESERT.

A few metres away, it's 35°C in the shade. But here, a trendy couple enjoy a decaf soy latte with a slice of carrot cake as the cool breeze blows over their backs briefly before disappearing. This is emblematic of Saudi Arabian opulence, where anything can be accomplished, regardless of any constraints of cost, common sense or sustainability. The country is dedicated to tourism, both domestic and international, having recently opened up to foreigners as a travel destination. And it has much to offer – a wonderful fusion of art, history, culture and incredible landscapes. Now, local officials are hoping to entice more daring holidaymakers to the desolate and exceedingly dry region around Al'Ula. After road cyclists, mountain bikers are the next demographic being focused on. We're told there's "huge potential" for growth. That's why I'm here, along with former Enduro World Series racer Anita Gehrig and trials star (and ex-world champ) Tom Öhler, on a quest to find MTB trails in the Saudi Arabian desert.

Bedouin down

There's a loud knock at our door in the dead of night. It's our tour guide Ian, come to pick us up. We drive for about an hour to an area known as 'the dead camel' – true enough, after setting off on our bikes, we soon come across camels' bones. As we work our way up and over slick, and in places quite steep, rock formations in the middle of the barren desert, the sun is just peeking over the horizon, giving the morning sky a warm yellow-orange hue. On the red rocks, Tom feels completely at home. As Anita follows him, he nose-wheelies down the steep slopes and hops over little gaps.

We get back to the pick-up and Ian drives us to the next destination, where

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WE WORK OUR WAY UP AND OVER STEEP ROCK FORMATIONS IN THE MIDDLE OF THE BARREN DESERT, AS THE MORNING SUN GIVES THE SKY A WARM ORANGE HUE

there's a massive granite arch towering over the sands and, unlike where we've just come from, signs of previous visitors. It turns out that two weeks ago, at dusk, in front of the arch, there was a classical concert, complete with five-star catering. There doesn't appear to be any outcry in Saudi Arabia about the fact that a two-lane tarmac road was constructed in the middle of the desert for this very purpose. Getting privileged guests out into nature as fast and as easily as possible, without sacrificing comfort, is of the utmost importance. As for trails, there are none.

Only a couple of hundred meters away is a camel paddock and some spacious tents. A young man waves as we draw near, inviting us inside. Even though we don't share language, the warmth of the man and his two brothers is immediately apparent and rapidly dispels Anita's initial reluctance to go in, due to her lack of head coverage and her biking clothes. We're continuously supplied with tea, dates and other delicacies. By gesturing, we're able to ask: "Are there any mountain bikers here?" It appears we're the first riders these Bedouins have ever seen.

Old and new

The following day, Ian introduces us to a local guide, Abdul. He, too, offers us tea and pastries in his garden. The first stop is the city's old quarter. We ride on sandy paths under the shady palm and orange trees, past crumbling city walls, with the afternoon sun casting a mystical glow. Abdul recalls

1 Tom surfs the sand – this is certainly a unique place to ride!

2 The crew found the Bedouins to be incredibly friendly and accommodating

3 Meeting some friendly local types

4 Cruising down a ridgeline in true golden-hour style

5 There may not be many purpose-built trails, but there's plenty to work with!

6 Loading bikes into the pickup truck

7 Tom and Anita sharing the stoke!

IRAQ
IRAN
EGYPT
RIYADH
SAUDI ARABIA
JEDDAH
SUDAN
YEMEN

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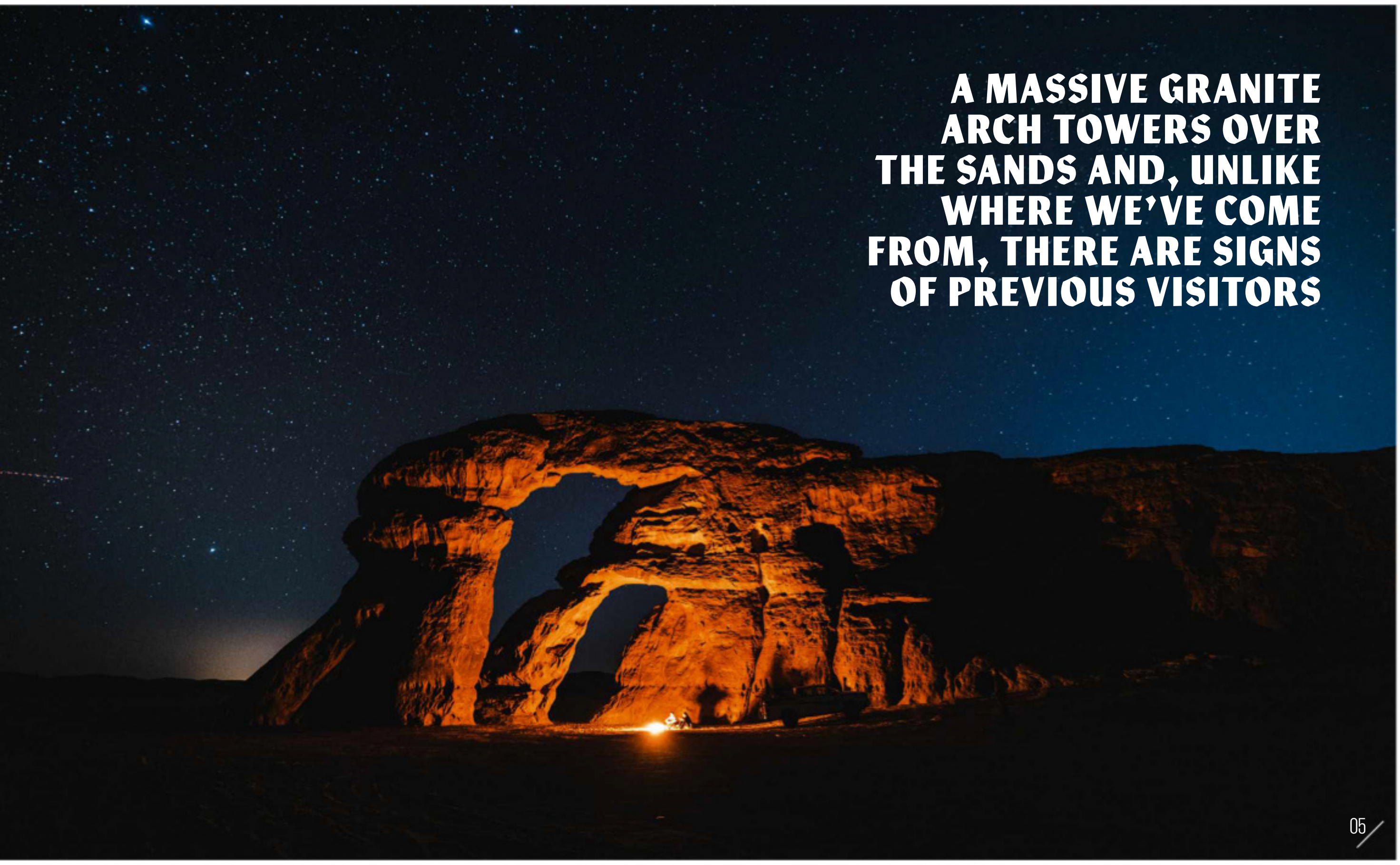

> A MASSIVE GRANITE ARCH TOWERS OVER THE SANDS AND, UNLIKE WHERE WE'VE COME FROM, THERE ARE SIGNS OF PREVIOUS VISITORS

1 Anita tears through the desert sand beneath the baking sun

2 Watching the balloon trips over the Arabian Peninsula

3 Stopping for a break in the ancient streets, to a warm welcome from the locals

4 Trials rider Tom shows what he's made of on a spectacular rock face

5 In the desert after dark, under a blanket of stars, it's hard not to think of the *Arabian Nights*

the fun he had here when he was a kid, as he leads us through the maze of ruins, joking and smiling the whole while. The official 'Old Town' is just a few hundred metres away. A parking area for the shuttle buses that bring in the crowds of sightseers is conveniently located near the front entry. Suddenly, a huge SUV honks unexpectedly and pulls up next to us. Inside are three fashionable women who are curious about our origins. Anita informs them of our biking intentions, and we find out that they're visiting from Medina for the weekend. Before 2018, it would've been impossible to capture such a scene. Within the past five years, however, the country has seen dramatic change. Women can now drive and are no longer required to cover their faces in public. It's predicted that selling alcohol will be legalised soon, too. After a brief conversation, the women speed off.

To enter the 'Old Town' we must push our bikes. The remains of the city walls appear to be the only ancient part. Inside, the architecture is reminiscent of a tourist's vision of an Arabian village. There are also plenty of tourist traps selling fake antiques, in among the Dunkin' Donuts and Starbucks branches. We prefer the crumbling ruins over this pristine replica of an old town, and are keen to ride some proper trails, too – something that's eluded us so far on this trip and that Ian promises will happen as soon as tomorrow.

Sands of time

We arrive in the desert at dawn, in time for the launch of the annual balloon festival. In a matter of minutes, the wind has blown the brightly-coloured hot air balloons our way. We load the bikes back onto the pickup and drive on to the promised trail centre. From the car park we see the pristine sculpted paths traverse only a few hundred square metres of barren, ruddy hills. We were informed with great pride that they were constructed with mountain bikers in mind. It doesn't appear that any actual riders were involved in designing or building them, though. There's little sense of flow, and our back tyres slice through the sloppy terrain like a hot knife through

الفريق THE TEAM الفريق

Anita Gehrig

For a long time, Anita raced professionally, even finishing on the podium in the EWS. After hanging up her racing shoes, she and her twin sister, Caro, opened a hotel in the Swiss mountains.
www.twinsmtbracing.com
@anitagehrig

Tom Öhler

This Austrian trials star is a former world and European champ who's well-known for his thrilling shows and breathtaking film and video appearances.
@tom_oehler

Martin Bissig

Swiss snapper Martin is one of Europe's most widely-published outdoor photography specialists. He's worked with clients from all around the world in the biking, outdoor and tourism industries.
www.bissig.ch
@martinbissig

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02

03

1 Checking out the new MTB-focused developments in Saudi Arabia

2 Traditional Bedouin hospitality involves a lot of tea

3 The crew ride past the surreal Maraya concert hall

4 One of Al'Ula's ancient stone temples gives strong *Indiana Jones* vibes

04

butter, causing deep holes to open up. It's just as well the trail centre is still something of a well-kept secret, because the few metres of singletrack would soon become unridable if there were more traffic over them.

Ian leads us onwards, to a peculiar anomaly in the desert – a giant cube constructed entirely of mirrors. The glass palace hosts concerts by international superstars for the area's wealthier visitors. However, there's a minor catch – entry is restricted to those who've purchased tickets or booked a night at one of the adjacent high-end hotels. At the gate, Ian convinces the guard that we have an urgent rendezvous with a fictitious camel driver and he lets us in with our bikes. Inside, we witness tankers watering the sandy roads, so that tourists aren't inconvenienced by the dust that their SUVs stir up. This is in a region that hasn't seen any precipitation for over a year-and-a-half!

It's time to come to a conclusion after a week in Saudi Arabia. Everybody we've met has been incredibly welcoming, generous and warm. We've sampled the finest dishes of the Arabian Peninsula, seen awe-inspiring ancient tombs and ridden in remote, rarely visited areas. It's been a week packed not only with new experiences, but also stark contrasts and overt opulence that's had us scratching our heads more than once. Despite its "huge potential", though, there's simply no justification in flying this far for a few metres of trail.

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THE BEST BIKES & MTB KIT GIVEN A THRASHING

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MEET THE TESTERS

ROBIN WEAVER
TECH EDITOR IN CHIEF
With three decades of MTB experience, Rob can identify the kit that works

TOM MARVIN
SENIOR TECH EDITOR
XC/trail/enduro rider and tech wizard Tom gives his gear a proper hammering

SARAH BEDFORD
TESTER
Tweed Valley-based Sarah has top trails to test on and years of experience

JAMES COSTLEY-WHITE
EDITOR
Riding since '92, JCW knows the score and has an eye for the key details

KATHERINE MOORE
TESTER
A route maker and guide, Kat is after kit that performs on all-day rides

RACHEL BENNET
STAFF WRITER
Rach hails from northern Scotland and has spent years riding tough tracks

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Our technical-editor-in-chief Rob Weaver gets new products in as soon as they're available and coordinates all the testing through our team of tech experts, who have unrivalled knowledge and experience.

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MBUK ★★★★★ **EXCEPTIONAL**
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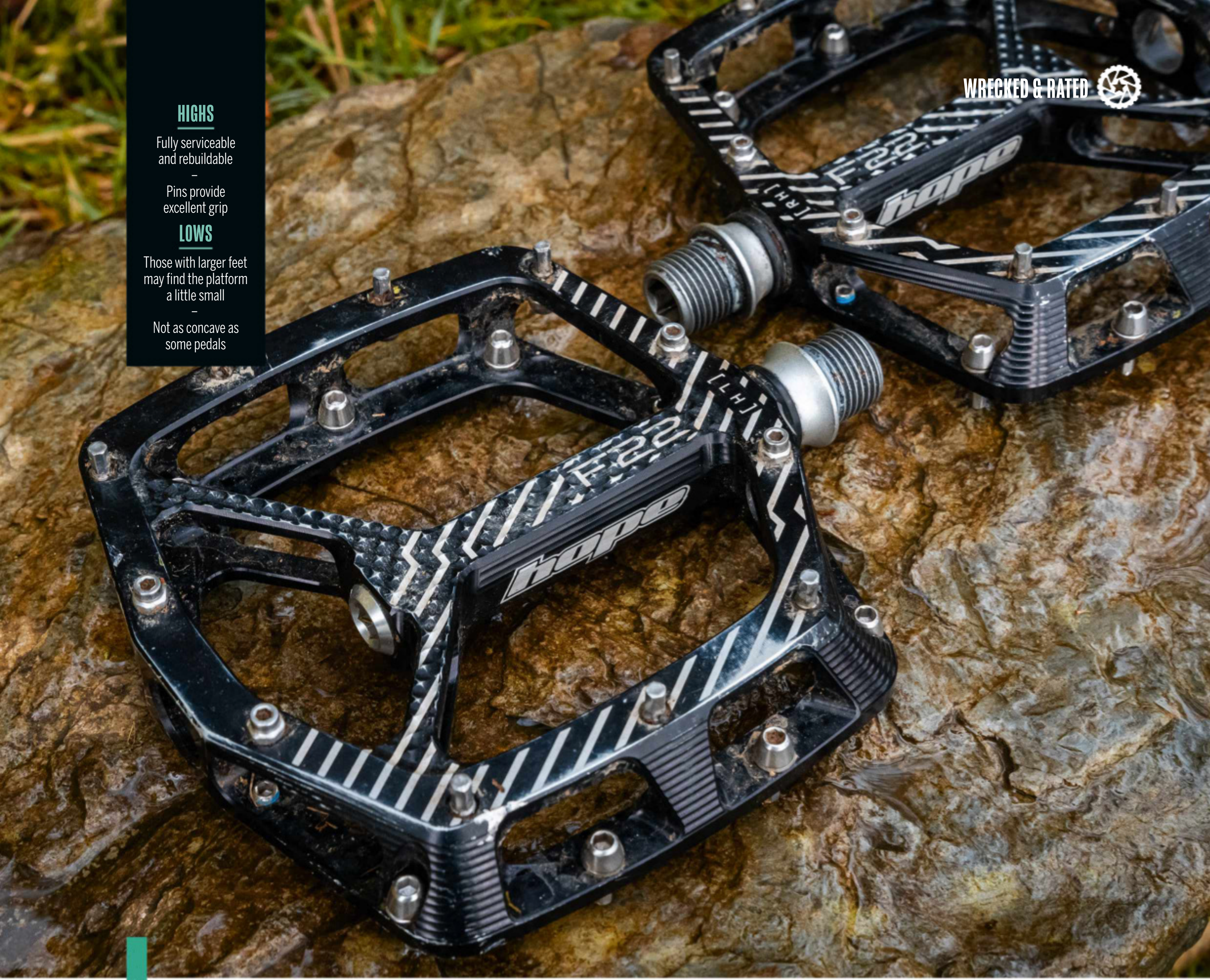
VELOCIO WOMEN'S MERINO MESH BASELAYER

£84 www.velocio.cc

As with all of Velocio's kit, this lightweight, textured long-sleeve layer is available in both women's and men's cuts. We tested the former, which is figure-fitting without being tight, tailored in at the waist and not excessively long – an issue with some women's baselayers. A high crew neck gives good coverage up top. The panels of fabric are joined by flatlock stitching to avoid irritation – something also aided by the tagless collar and silky care label. Branding is limited to a coloured tab, giving an understated look. The 51 per cent merino wool, 49 per cent polyester blend fabric is deceptively warm and achieves a great balance between comfort, insulation and odour resistance, while the mesh weave helps wick sweat away from your skin during more intense efforts. On warmer, wet rides, this honeycomb-like structure also helps the fabric to dry out more quickly, whether doused with sweat or trail spray. While it's hard to fault the performance of this baselayer, it is quite pricey. **Katherine**

MBUK ★★★★☆



HIGHS

Fully serviceable and rebuildable

–

Pins provide excellent grip

LOWS

Those with larger feet may find the platform a little small

–

Not as concave as some pedals

HOPE F22 FLAT PEDALS

£145 www.hopetech.com

A decade on from the launch of their popular F20 pedals, Hope have released an updated set of flats. CNC-machined in Lancashire, the F22s boast a redesigned platform that's larger and more concave. As expected with Hope components, they're fully user-serviceable, with parts available so you can rebuild them when necessary. They're offered in a range of six anodised colours – red, orange, blue, purple, silver and black.

With a usable platform size of 105x102mm, the F22s are still considerably smaller than some other flat pedals. This may cause problems for those with larger feet, potentially reducing grip and increasing foot fatigue. The size was bang-on for our tester's UK7.5 feet, leaving them feeling firmly planted and not causing any 'clawing' around the pedal. However, we wouldn't want to go any smaller.

The asymmetric shape of the pedals is designed to give greater clearance on tight and rutty trails. We found they brushed off ground strikes with ease. While the F22s do have a concave profile to help cup your feet – with a depth of 17mm at the edges and 14mm in the centre – we felt this could be more pronounced, to give even more security.

Hope have paid particular attention to pin placement and size. Each side has four 4mm pins near the axle and seven 6mm ones on the outer edge, which can be shortened to 5mm using the supplied washers. We opted to run them at full length to give the pedals a more concave feel. The pins are reverse-loading for security and ease of removal, and have a hexagonal base, which should make them easy to get out even if the Allen heads get damaged.

Even on the roughest trails in the Lake District (see p42), we found that the pins provided plenty of traction and we never had a problem with our feet flying off the pedals mid-descent, letting us focus on the riding without worrying about what was going on 'below stairs'.

The internals are largely unchanged, although the axle – which spins on cartridge bearings and an IGUS bushing – has been strengthened. We found it straightforward to remove, clean and regrease, so keeping on top of servicing shouldn't be a problem.

It remains to be seen how the F22s perform in terms of longevity, but the three seals have done their job of keeping dirt and debris at bay throughout testing. For those with smaller feet or who prefer a more compact platform, these are secure-feeling pedals that appear built for the long haul, making them well worth the expense. **Rachel**

MBUK VERDICT ★★★★☆

Grippy pedals that look great and work well, although a bigger platform would increase security for larger feet

FI'ZI:K TERRA ARTICA GTX WINTER BOOTS

£249.99 www.extrauk.co.uk

The cosy brushed-fleece lining makes it a pleasure to slide your feet into these weatherproofed clipless shoes from the punctuationally-challenged Italians. A Boa cable-dial closure keeps things secure even when walking over boggy ground and ensures even tension across the top of the foot. We found the toe area a little narrow, though, and our pair also rubbed on the inside of the ankle. Up top, a neoprene cuff helps keep the chill and splashes out, but doesn't extend as high as on rival boots, so doesn't create as effective a seal between shoe and trouser leg. Some testers found the Velcro strap sat uncomfortably against their ankle bone, too. The polyurethane-coated upper and GORE-TEX membrane keep the damp at bay effectively, even coping with full submersion. We were impressed by the sole, too, its deep tread lugs and grippy rubber providing plenty of traction off the bike. Lighter-feeling and less clumpy than a lot of the competition (although, at 1,050g for our EU45 pair, actually heavier than some), the Terra Articas have some good features, and are priced in line with other GORE-TEX shoes. They're not the most comfortable, though, and the low cuff lets water in when wearing shorter or flappier waterproof trousers, which isn't ideal. **JCW**

MBUK VERDICT ★★★☆☆

Waterproof winter shoes with some good features but a few annoying niggles

BOSCH EASYPUMP MINI COMPRESSOR

£68 www.bosch-diy.com

While it's a bit bulky to carry in your pack, Bosch's EasyPump is a handy tool to sling in your car or van. Charged via USB-C, it'll pump up tyres and other small- to medium-sized inflatables, stopping at your designated pressure and offering adjustment in 0.5psi increments. With a full battery, we managed 13 inflations of a 29x2.5in tyre, to an indicated 23psi. It actually under-inflated by 2psi at this level of pressure, but did so consistently, at least, taking just over 90 seconds each time. The handle compartment holds adapters, including for Presta valves, while the digital display shows the current and target pressures. A track pump is quicker and the EasyPump lacks the power to pop tubeless tyres back onto the rim, but as a general-use tool, it's proven handy, both for bike use and topping up our van tyres. **Tom**

MBUK ★★★☆☆

STOLEN GOAT MTB SHORTS

£90 https://stolengoat.com

We didn't expect much from these debut MTB shorts from roadie-focused Stolen Goat, but they're actually pretty good. There's just one colour and only the essential features – four-way stretch, zipped front pockets, Velcro tabs and a zip-and-poppers fly. Sizing is on the large side – our 'small' sample fitted riders who'd normally wear a medium, with a 32in waist and enough stretch to fit a 34in midriff. The inseam was 1cm shorter than the claimed 39.5cm, too, but the legs were long enough for tall riders, and wide enough for pads but not too baggy. While pricey for a lesser-known brand, these are a solid buy. **JCW**

MBUK ★★★½☆

HIGHS

Fully waterproof (when worn with long enough trousers)

–

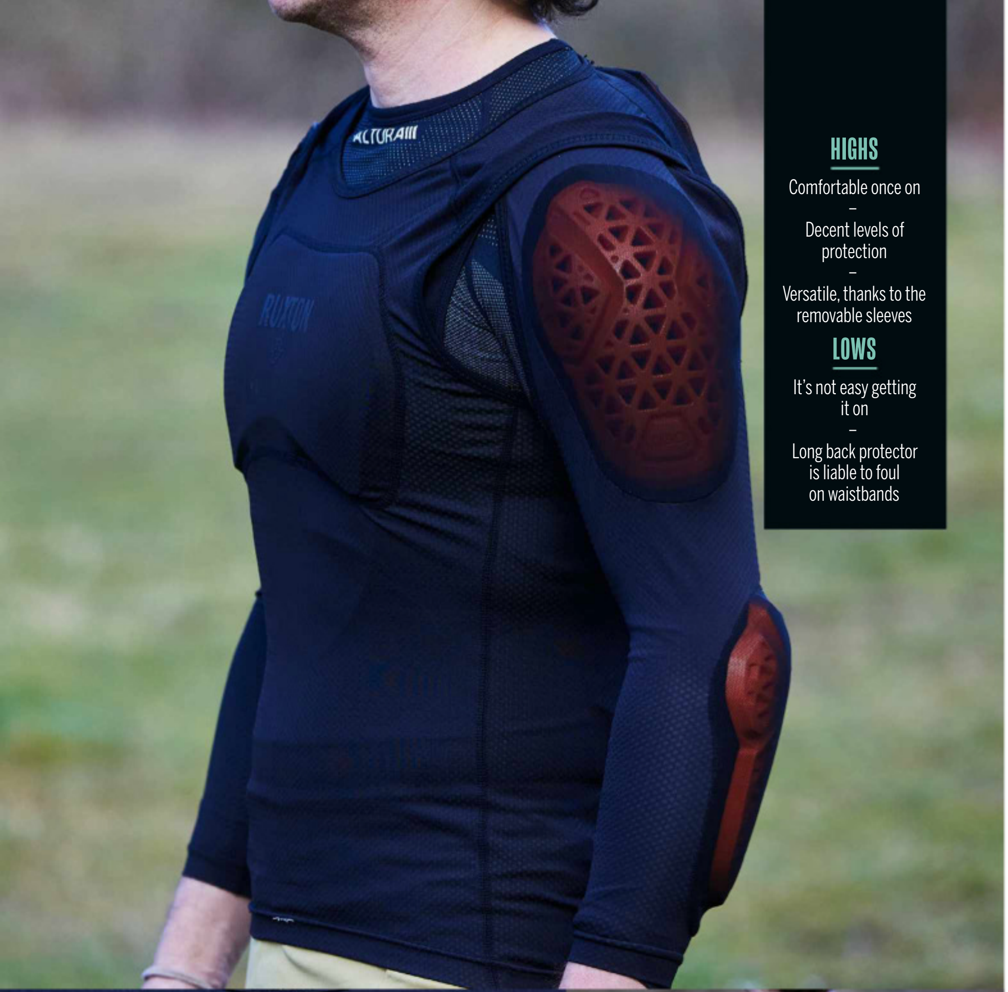
Grippy sole

LOWS

Neoprene cuff doesn't extend high enough

–

Not the comfiest shoes we've tried



HIGHS

Comfortable once on
–
Decent levels of protection
–
Versatile, thanks to the removable sleeves

LOWS

It's not easy getting it on
–
Long back protector is liable to foul on waistbands

RACE FACE RUXTON BODY ARMOUR

£199.95 www.silverfish-uk.com

You can wear this body armour as a full jacket – protecting your back, chest, shoulders and elbows – or zip off the sleeves to turn it into a vest. At the rear, a broad D3O BP4 back protector offers a lot of coverage (and CE level one safety certification). Up front, thinner foam covers a smaller area across your chest, but does add peace of mind. The sleeves – which attach with well-guarded zips that go unnoticed when riding – house D3O inserts at the shoulder and elbow (also CE level one), which can be whipped out for washing.

Race Face offer the Ruxton in five sizes (S-XXL). We opted for the small to ensure a tight fit, but found it wasn't easy to get the armour on. With no side/front opening, you have to pull it over your head and manipulate your torso to get it into place. That sounds easy, but feels rather awkward in practice. Once on, though, the snug fit means it doesn't shift around while riding. And, on the whole, the Ruxton is really comfortable to ride in.

The back protector is quite long and can foul on the waistbands of shorts/trousers if you don't sit the vest/jacket over the top of them. But otherwise, it doesn't take long to forget you're wearing body armour at all, thanks in part to the comfort, but also how well the arms fit. Yes, you'll get warm, but for uplift days this isn't a major issue. **Rob**

MBUK VERDICT ★★★⯪☆

Tricky to get on but comfy once it is, and easy to forget about while riding

G-FORM

GO NEXT LEVEL

MX360
Impact Shirt

① SmartFlex Stretch padding protects during crashes and falls
② Full-length front locking zipper for easy on/off
③ Ventilated removable back pad is made up of G-Form's SmartFlex and multi-density foam for added comfort
④ CE-1621-2 certified

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FASTHOUSE

Most wanted
MBUK

FASTHOUSE HOOPER KNEE PADS

£89.99 https://fasthouse.co.uk

Fasthouse haven't made much of a song-and-dance about their Hooper knee pads, but we think they should! In terms of comfort, they're not far off our go-to Rapha Trail pads, offering a snug, well-shaped fit and the same CE level two certification. They come in four sizes (S-XL), and rely on a flexible material that hardens upon impact (like D3O) to do the bulk of the protective work. This is heavily pre-shaped to wrap around the knee. Just below this, a foam insert extends down the leg, offering your shins some welcome additional protection. There's silicone print at the top and bottom openings to help hold the Hoopers up, while a mesh panel runs up the back of the stretchy sleeve to help prevent them getting too clammy. In use, we found the Hooper pads to be extremely comfortable and to flex in all the right places, making them excellent for long days of pedalling. Tension through the sleeve helps to keep the protective knee cup pulled tight against the leg. However, we did find we had to hitch the lower elasticated opening up our legs a little to keep them firmly in place – an additional tensioning strap across the back, just above the top of the calf, could help resolve this. This is a minor niggle, though, and otherwise, we've nothing but praise for these well-priced, comfortable pads, which offer good coverage and a decent, leg-hugging fit. **Rob**

MBUK **VERDICT** ★★★★½

Comfy pads that offer plenty of protection at a reasonable price

HIGHS

Comfortable, with a solid fit and good articulation

–

Plenty of coverage

–

LOWS

Do require some jiggling around to keep them firmly in place

DHB SOFTSHELL JACKET

£110 www.wiggle.co.uk

This softshell has a supple, high-quality feel, for a great price. It's comfortable to wear both on and off the bike, thanks to plenty of stretch and a soft grid-fleece interior. Highlights include a long, adjustable dropped hem, shaped cuffs with interior Lycra sleeves for a close fit, and a water-repellent YKK zip. You get two mesh-lined hand pockets plus another on the chest. With breathability and waterproof ratings of 10,000g/m^2/24hr and 10,000mm, respectively, this jacket is best suited to cool days with passing showers. While the adjustable hood will stretch over a low-profile helmet, we found that doing so caused the whole jacket to lift up, plus the hood only covered two-thirds of the lid. The peak is described as 'stiffened' but only reached our hairline, so did little to shelter our faces from the elements. **Sarah**

MBUK ★★★★☆

KOO DEMOS GLASSES

From £140 https://kooworld.cc

The Demo glasses fit in perfectly with the current trend for oversized specs. Handmade in Italy, they're available in several frame/lens combos, all featuring Zeiss polycarbonate lenses. With a wide field of view, we found the frame didn't encroach into our peripheral vision and they fitted well, with no compatibility issues with the various helmets we tried them with. They're extremely secure, comfortable and light, at 31g. The curved arms lightly pinch the head and are held in place by anti-slip rubber inserts and flexible temple tips. You get a choice of a nose bridge or rubber pads, which are both adjustable to fit. We tested the rose lens, which is great for low-light conditions. With four long vents, the lens stayed fog-free, even on high-tempo cold rides. Clarity is great, but there's no clear lens option. The photochromic lens is fantastic, too, but you'll have to stump up an extra £79.99 for that. **Jimmer**

MBUK ★★★★☆

6 OF THE BEST HANDLEBAR GRIPS

They're one of the main contact points with your bike, so getting a good pair is crucial

Diameter 31.5mm

REVGRIPS RACE SERIES HALF WAFFLE

£69.99 www.cyclorise.com

SO GOOD... If you're looking for every possible reduction in vibration, then these 'suspended' grips provide a small amount of extra damping, courtesy of shock-absorbing inserts. The half-waffle pattern adds to the comfort, and offers plenty of traction. They're cheaper than Revgrips' lighter, tunable Race series grips, and come in various options.
NO GOOD... The dual-clamp design necessitated by the inserts won't work for riders who like to place their hands right at the ends of the bar. Just shy of £70 is steep for a pair of grips, and for us, the benefits offered don't quite match the cost.

MBUK ★★★☆☆

Diameter 30mm (slim)

ERGON GE1 EVO FACTORY

£36.99 www.extrauk.com

SO GOOD... These use softer rubber than Ergon's standard, well-established GE1 grips, for better traction and more comfort. The compound has a quality feel to it, giving a sensation of greater control, rather than increased cushioning. A unique flared shape helps the grips work to support the hand and wrist.
NO GOOD... For us, these grips are overly long and take up too much of the handlebar, making it harder to get levers and shifters set up to our liking. Also, it's hard to justify paying this much when there are decent, more comfortable grips for less money.

MBUK ★★★½☆

Diameter 30mm

ALL MOUNTAIN STYLE CERO

£27 www.extrauk.com

SO GOOD... AMS's rubber compound is comfortable, does a decent job of filtering out trail vibration and provides good mechanical traction when wearing gloves. The half-waffle pattern underneath adds extra purchase for your fingers, and the slight outboard flange is helpful for riders who place their hands at the ends of the bar.
NO GOOD... When riding, we couldn't feel the difference in texture between the diamond-patterned thumb area and the main body of the grips, unlike on the DMRs. Also, the knurl pattern on top of the grips isn't as defined and grippy as others on test.

MBUK ★★★½☆

Diameter 30/32mm

ODI ELITE PRO

£27.99 www.freewheel.co.uk

SO GOOD... The ergonomic design of the Elite Pros adds comfort without making them feel overly bulky. Even with the extra padding, they don't squirm in your hands, and the rubber feels like it should hold up to plenty of use. Control and support are decent. The large outboard flange is reassuring for riders who like to place their paws at the ends of the bar, while the half-waffle underside helps keep your fingertips in place.
NO GOOD... We'd prefer softer rubber, to add more comfort. Also, it's a shame that the padding tapers away towards the ends of the grips, where it's needed most.

MBUK ★★★★☆

Value
MBUK
Diameter 28.5/31mm

BRAND-X HALF-WAFFLE

£7.99 www.hotlines-uk.com

SO GOOD... For eight quid, these grips are a steal. The tapered design adds comfort where it's needed, at the edge of the grips, while providing plenty of control under the palm. There's decent traction from the knurl pattern, and the half-waffle underside is a useful added touch. Performance is unmatched for the price, and if you 'just need grips', these work well. The plastic lock-on clamp does an OK job.
NO GOOD... You don't get a metal clamp, as the others here. Also, the rubber doesn't have such a premium feel and could be softer to increase comfort.

MBUK ★★★★☆

Winner
MBUK
Diameter 30mm

DMR DEATHGRIP RACE EDITION

£26 www.upgradebikes.co.uk

SO GOOD... After ultimate traction? These super-soft grips are the way to go. The coarse knurl pattern bites into your gloves, providing unrivalled grip, while the tacky rubber provides a plush feel, without squirming around or feeling vague. A 'mushroom' section adds comfort under the thumb, and the half-waffle underside is a useful fingertip guide. The short length leaves plenty of bar space for levers and remotes.
NO GOOD... Don't expect them to last for loads of rides – it's quality over quantity here. A more pronounced flange would give a little more security to the outsides of your hands.

MBUK ★★★★½

LONGTERM RIDES

Team bikes ridden hard for a year

LUKE'S CANYON STRIVE CFR UNDERDOG £4,799

A new fork is highlighting the rear shock's deficiencies for our technical writer

This month, I've been enjoying the ZEB fork I fitted. If you're looking for more mid-stroke support and firmer progression from your RockShox fork, then their latest DebonAir+ spring is what you'll want. Compared to the previous-generation ZEB, the 2023 model rides noticeably higher in its travel and offers ample support when charging into rough trails and more stability in turns. There's also plenty of travel left in reserve to deal with harsh compressions.

The ZEB isn't at the top end of the supportive spectrum, like EXT's ERA, for example, but it has moved towards it. Fortunately, it's still plush and supple through the initial part of its travel, too. DebonAir+ certainly feels like an improvement over the older spring, and the good news is that it can be retrofitted in all ZEB forks. I reckon it's a worthy upgrade.

Improving the front suspension has highlighted how underwhelming the rear end can feel through slow but rough sections of trail. Even with its compression damping left fully open and its rebound set fast, the Fox Float X2 Performance shock doesn't feel as composed and plush as the fork, making me think it may need a retune to get more from it. It comes alive when riding hard, but I've tested bikes with more lively Fox shocks.

So, where have I been putting this to the test? I've been hitting up my local tracks lately and haven't ventured too far afield. I feel like I cursed us all last time by saying how dry the trails were, and it's been sloppy out there recently. Still, that's given me plenty of time on familiar trails to find any quirks with my set-up changes. I'm getting an appetite for loading up the van for a change of scenery and to get the Strive on some faster runs, though.

As for how it's faring after its first winter, I've not had any maintenance or mechanical woes yet. The Shapeshifter system (which adjusts the bike's geometry, travel and kinematics) has worked flawlessly, too, despite its extra complexity, so I've got no complaints there. I think this is a great feature, and Canyon have been smart to keep it and implement it so well.

I hope next time I can talk about taking the Strive further afield to see how far I can push it, or, more likely, how far it pushes my limits.

www.canyon.com

my month

HIGHS

The new DebonAir+ spring is a worthwhile upgrade for existing RockShox users

–

The Strive keeps on trucking, not letting mud and gunk slow it down

LOWS

The shock needs some attention so it can keep up with the fork

JIMMER'S CANNONDALE MOTERRA NEO CARBON LT 2 £7,250

Who needs a gym membership when you have 'The Beast' to ride!

Weighing in at 26.2kg – and that's without pedals – the Moterra is super-heavy, even for an e-MTB. After every big ride I take it on, it feels like I've gone a few rounds with Tyson Fury! But you know what they say – what doesn't kill you only makes you stronger...

The big issue I needed to address was the massive amount of arm pump I was getting on long, rough descents. It's like nothing I've experienced before. To mitigate this, I've swapped out the stock alloy riser bar for an 800mm-wide, 20mm-rise OneUp carbon bar. I've also switched the grips for some Renthal lock-ons in their 'Super Comfort' compound. These changes are already paying dividends, with no noticeable arm pump on my last few rides, so that's a win!

I've made some smaller tweaks, too. First up, I've flipped the Bosch Kiox display so it sits centrally over my stem – I hated it sticking out in front of me! I've also fitted some Peaty's tubeless valves, because I lost one of the old ones when I stuck a tube in after trying and failing to fix a snakebite puncture in the rear tyre.

After riding loads of varied trails, I now know where the Moterra excels and suffers. Even with the mullet wheel set-up, tight switchback turns have been my biggest challenge. Leaning the bike into them with full commitment – and all that weight – is quite an ask. That said, aim it into long, fast, rough sections and you can feel the 165mm of coil-sprung rear-wheel travel come into its own. Before handing the bike over to me, Rob fitted a lighter 400lb spring. Luckily, we're evenly matched in stature and weight, so it suits me perfectly.

Surprisingly, for such a heavy bike, the Cannondale feels quite reactive over smaller obstacles. When the trail mellows and you'd be pumping an analogue bike for flow, you can feel the Moterra's motor throttle back once it exceeds its 15.5mph assistance limit. This makes things hard work and sucks some of the fun out of it, but hey, this is a bike aimed at enduro riders and gnarly terrain.

On the plus side, it makes climbing pure joy. Plus, it's getting me out riding more, which was always the goal with this bike. I'd just like to be able to ride it in the dry, pretty please!

www.cannondale.com

my month

HIGHS

Getting in the miles at full pace

–

It feels awesome when pushed hard in the rough stuff

LOWS

Your upper body gets one hell of a workout

–

It can be hard to handle in tight corners

UPGRADES

OneUp Component carbon bar, £149.50 *https://uk.oneupcomponents.com*

–

Renthal Super Comfort lock-on grips, £30.95 *www.renthal.com*

TOMS MERIDA ONE-FORTY 6000 £4,500

Our senior tech ed has been fine-tuning his ride ready for spring

With the tyres now on point and some test brakes fitted, I felt it was time to alter the Merida's cockpit to suit my preferences. The stock bike comes with a 50mm stem, which, combined with the long reach (509mm!) and 65-degree head angle, made for lazy handling. I've swapped this for a 40mm number I found in the garage, to speed things up and bring a bit more agility to the handling. The 10mm change has made a noticeable difference – turning into a corner feels lighter, the bike is quicker to 'drop its shoulder' and feels overall like a tighter package.

Clamped into the stem is an 800mm OneUp bar I snaffled from Luke. I'm never sure why brands spec sub-800mm bars on aggressive bikes (see p18) – I like the breadth that wider bars offer, even if there is the worry of squashed pinkies when threading through trees! Finishing things off are a set of ODI Reflex grips, which are thicker, softer and filter out trail buzz better than the stock Merida grips, which had to go.

On-bike storage is in vogue, and the Merida has it in spades. There's a long umbrella-shaped roll that can be slid up the down tube; a tube holder under the top tube; a multi-tool under the saddle; and a rear-axle lever that doubles (or triples!) as a 4mm and 6mm Allen key. The multi-tool and axle tool haven't survived my purge. Instead, I've stuffed a different tool down the fork steerer. Now that's sorted, hopefully next time I can give some updates about the actual riding!
www.merida-bikes.com

my month

HIGHS

All the components are now up to spec

–

Handling mixes stability with agility

LOWS

A bike like this should really come with a wider bar and shorter stem

MAX'S PIVOT TRAIL 429 RIDE SLX/XT £7,000

A day at Rogate Downhill B1kepark allowed me to fettle with the Trail 429's set-up. The 'sag-o-meter' on the rear shock is handy for taking the guesswork out of pressure changes, but, with no volume spacers to hand, I found I needed to go out of the recommended zone to stop it bottoming-out. Running far less sag means I've lost some sensitivity, but overall, the bike feels smooth, especially through its mid-stroke, and sucks up rooty trails with ease. It's great on technical climbs, too, and, with no uplift at Rogate, I was happy riding up the singletrack while others walked. Bouncing down these technical tracks made me appreciate the silence of this bike, aided by the rubber hose inserts for the cables where they disappear into the frame.
https://saddleback.co.uk

SARAH'S SANTA CRUZ BLUR XC C S £5,599

I've been focusing on getting the most out of the Blur XC's RockShox SID fork. The Select+ version on my bike only has a rebound dial and lacks the compression damping adjustment of the SID Ultimate. To prevent the fork bottoming-out, I'm going to try adding some Bottomless Tokens to make it more progressive. So far, I've added one volume spacer, and reduced the air pressure from 70 to 60psi. It's made a notable difference, letting me ride harder on chunky trails. This small yet significant change has got me interested in taking a deeper dive into suspension set-up, and the folk at Tweed Valley Bikes have kindly agreed to help by fitting their Motion Instruments data acquisition kit to my bike.
www.santacruzbicycles.com

my month

HIGHS

I've finally found a rear wheel so I can try a mullet set-up

LOWS

Only my stubbornness has stopped me leaving for home after just a couple of laps – I'm struggling to feel good on my bike at the moment

UPGRADES

DT Swiss EXC 1501 rear wheel, £849.99
www.dtswiss.com

JULIA'S SPECIALIZED STUMPJUMPER EVO PRO £8,750

Slow and steady doesn't always win the race…

I'm having a pretty hard time on the bike right now. Riding fills my weekends, and I fit in night rides during the week, so I'm accommodating it around my full-time job as best as I can. Yet, when I see the results of a photoshoot, I'm disappointed. I'm mostly going out with very experienced riders, and being the slowest and least skilled doesn't exactly boost my morale. The sport has massively helped my mental health, but it's also brought tears, frustration and self-doubt.

This is no reflection on the Stumpy EVO, though – it's a playful-feeling little bike, which should leave me with a big grin, especially now I've got a smaller back wheel so I can swap to a mullet set-up. As I write this, a posh DT Swiss EXC 1501 hoop is being fitted.

I'm not convinced I'm getting the best rebound performance from the Fox 36 Factory fork. It's heavily damped, which doesn't work well for lighter riders like me. The plan is to get it tuned, hoping that'll help me to bounce back!

Starting the year with the prospect of entering my first race was overwhelming and sapped some of the enjoyment of riding. But spring should bring sun and drier trails, and hopefully heal my tired mind. If you're struggling, too, take a leaf out of Nils's book on p100. Hang in there!
www.specialized.com

WILL P'S SARACEN ARIEL 80 PRO £3,499.99

I've been exploring more of my local trails, having moved to South Wales a few months ago. I've joined my local club (Risca Riders) and am discovering more and more riding around the hills that I can now legitimately call home. I'd already referred to it as 'the local' for a couple of years, because it was where I often ended up riding if there was no other plan, but that would usually involve spinning along the same handful of trails across three or four hillsides. I'm finding the Ariel 80 ideal for the steep, techy lines in the area – the long wheelbase and slack head angle give me plenty of confidence, while the 650b wheels make light work of the tight, twisty lines. The huge standover gives plenty of room to bail out when it all goes wrong, too!
www.saracen.co.uk

ROB'S NUKEPROOF GIGA 297 £2,799.99 (frame only, with EXT shock)

I love riding in new places, meeting the trail builders, sessioning with locals and seeing what else our little island has to offer us. Last month, I trucked up to Yorkshire to meet Alex from SRAM and go through the new things coming (including the drivetrains you can read about on p24). He wanted to show me some of his local riding spots, too. We met up with Mick Kirkman, who did this issue's biketest (p78) and, it turns out, is as creative with a spade as he is with a camera. Following them into berms and flying into the stratosphere over shady gaps was amazing. Riding blind is hard, but feeling confident with the Giga's handling made a world of difference. I had a blast!
www.hotlines-uk.com

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BIKETEST

USA TRAIL BIKES

We test three stunning-looking rides from the birthplace of MTB to see if American bikes are still up there with the best

MEET THE TESTER

MICK KIRKMAN
TESTER & PHOTOGRAPHER

With a background in BMX, 4X, dual slalom and DH racing, as well as bike development, Mick's ridden and documented mountain biking for 20 years and is one of only a few bike testers worldwide to have hundreds of reviews in print.

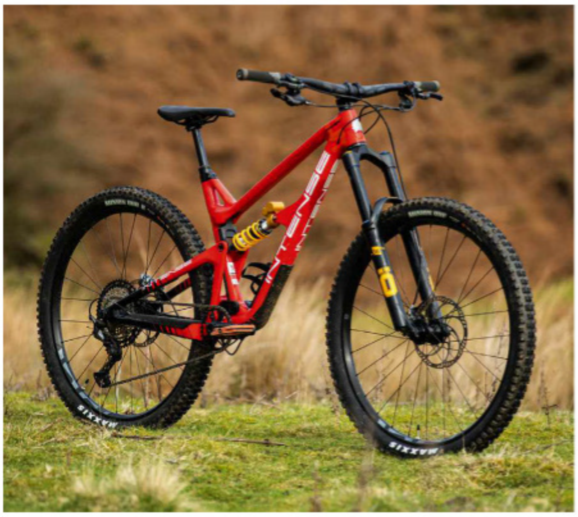
As the birthplace of mountain biking itself and some of the most legendary heritage brands, America is huge in the story of our sport. Manufacturers such as Intense, Pivot and Yeti are some of the most iconic around, with long histories, famous bikes and multiple racing and industry awards. But, with these brands focusing on the top end of the market and transatlantic shipping pushing prices up, you pay a premium for a US-designed bike. We wanted to find out if it's still worth it.

Not only did Americans create some of the first fat-tyred bikes and take the sport global, but they also invented some classic suspension designs, which brought the control and capability that defines how most people experience mountain biking today. After all that intense innovation, US brands eased off slightly towards the end of the 2000s, and other places took up the slack. Asian factories pushed carbon fibre, while European manufacturers experimented with new geometry, fuelled by a passion for enduro, which would prove every bit as revolutionary as adding suspension was.

Things come full circle, though, and the US trio here all have carbon frames and stretched-out, more stable frame shapes. The question is, how do they fit into a marketplace that's also been transformed by another European phenomenon – the emergence of online-only 'direct-sales' brands?

One obvious implication is price. To own this calibre of imported goods and the associated prestige, you need serious cash. Add ever-rising industry prices, and even the Intense Primer S – which can only be bought direct, making it incredible value compared to its rivals – costs the best part of six grand, while if you fancy cruising round on a shiny Pivot or Yeti with top-level kit, forget about it, unless you've got over £8k burning a hole in your pocket.

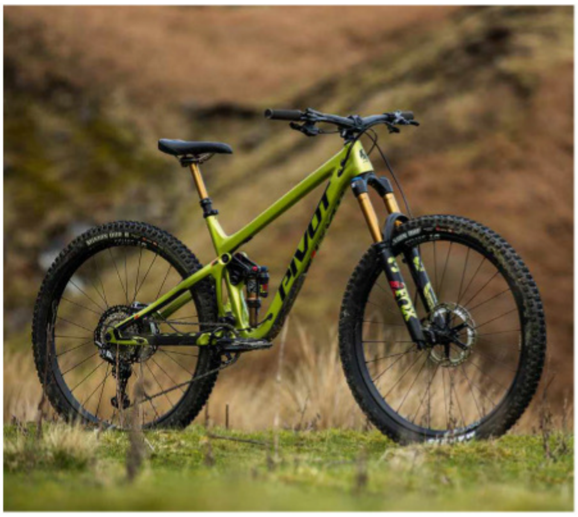
Dripping in top-tier parts, all three bikes here boast stunning looks, a trail-friendly 140mm of rear-wheel travel and longer forks for a more aggressive attitude. Intense's Primer S, Pivot's Switchblade and Yeti's new SB140 LR should represent the pinnacle of performance and desirability, but does the extra cost translate to a superior ride? And how does being designed for faster tracks in the drier, dustier USA translate to the mixed-up, wet and dry, hand-cut trails that many of us twist up and down here in the UK?



INTENSE PRIMER S

£5,799 (inc. shipping)

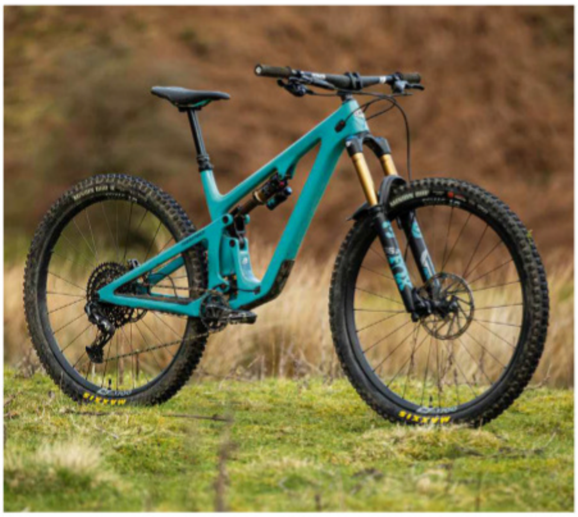
Sold directly from Intense's website, the full-carbon Primer S looks superb value compared to the other two bikes here. Despite costing over £2k less, you get a fork and shock from legendary Swedish motorsports outfit Öhlins, plus a load of kit from US brand e*thirteen. This includes a carbon bar, the majority of the drivetrain (paired with Shimano XT 12-speed gearing) and DH-spec wheels that match the Intense's burly design attitude.



PIVOT SWITCHBLADE 29 PRO

£8,100

The Switchblade blends enduro geometry with an ultra-light carbon frame. A flip-chip adjusts the angles for 29in wheels or a 'mullet' (29er front, 650b rear) set-up. Fox take care of the suspension, with their range-topping 36 Factory fork and Float X shock. The Shimano XTR 12-speed rear mech is another nod to top-end bling, while elsewhere quality but lower-tier kit dominates, including DT Swiss XM 1700 wheels and Shimano XT brakes, cassette and shifter.



YETI SB140 T1 LR 29

£8,499

'T-series' is YETI's highest-quality, lightest carbon fibre, here used to build a new 140mm-travel frame, which replaces the old SB130. 'LR' stands for 'Lunch Ride', and means it has a more aggressive build than the standard bike, inspired by the way Yeti's staff build up their own bikes to race each other back down to the factory. This includes a Fox 36 Factory fork and more powerful four-piston brakes – just the job for when things get rowdy trying to stick one to your boss!

OUR RATINGS

We base our scores on value for money and performance

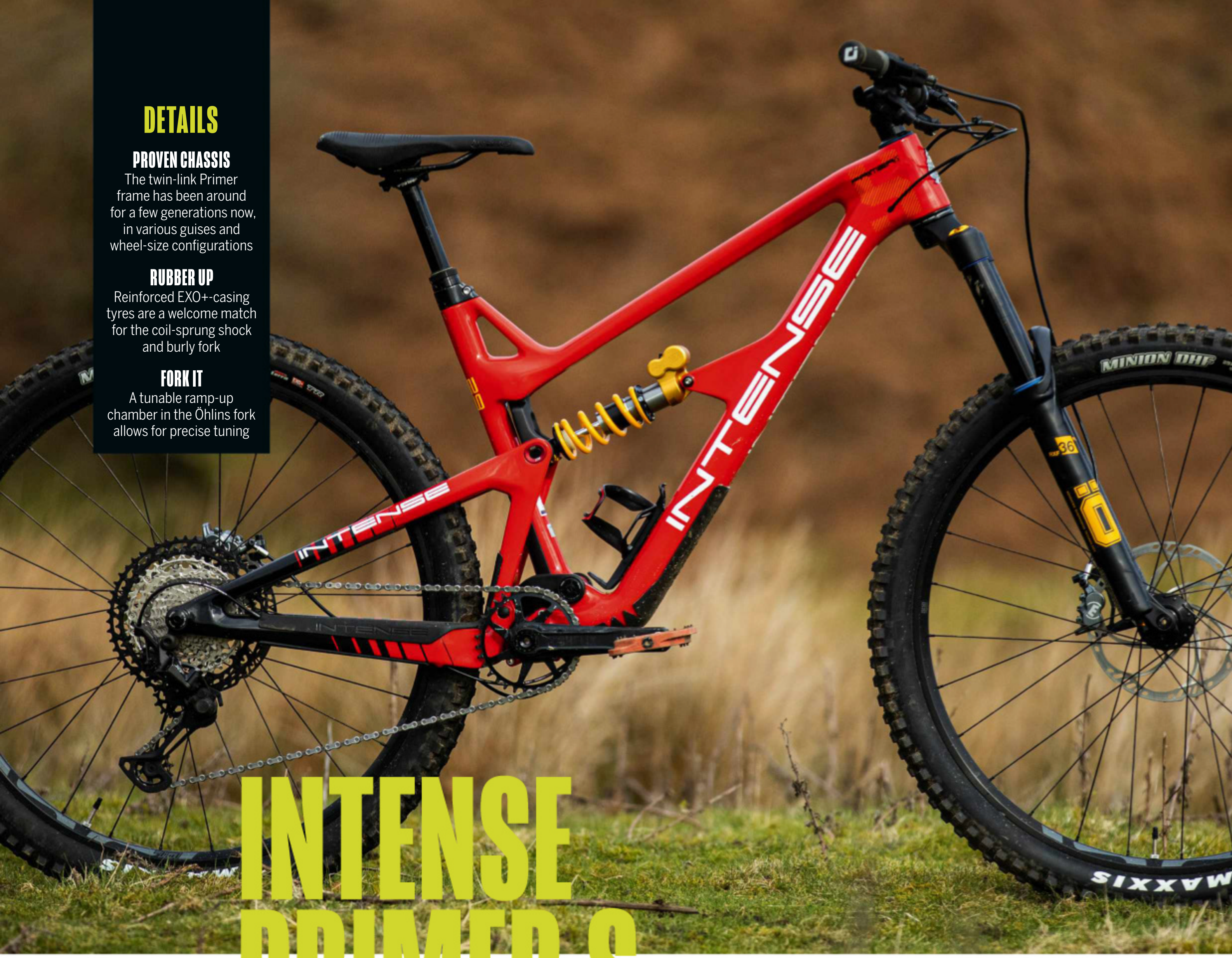
★★★★★
EXCEPTIONAL
Close to perfect (rare)

★★★★☆
VERY GOOD
Nearly class-leading

★★★☆☆
GOOD
Does the job well

★★☆☆☆
BELOW AVERAGE
Could be good, but flawed

★☆☆☆☆
POOR
We don't recommend this



DETAILS

PROVEN CHASSIS

The twin-link Primer frame has been around for a few generations now, in various guises and wheel-size configurations

RUBBER UP

Reinforced EXO+-casing tyres are a welcome match for the coil-sprung shock and burly fork

FORK IT

A tunable ramp-up chamber in the Öhlins fork allows for precise tuning

INTENSE PRIMER S

£5,799 Aggro trail bike with heavier-duty kit and supremely composed Öhlins suspension

On this 'S' version, Intense tip the do-it-all Primer more towards downhill capability, grip and stability by upping front travel to 160mm and adding a bump-munching coil-sprung shock out back. This set-up brings a shift in attitude similar to that achieved by Yeti with their Lunch Ride editions or Specialized with their EVO suffix. When it comes to value for money, the Primer S trounces the US-designed competition. The price advertised here is what you pay delivered in the UK, too – there are no hidden charges like you get from some online brands.

THE FRAME

Intense's racing heritage isn't only reflected in the Ferrari-like styling, but also details such as the weight-saving carbon upper rocker-link and titanium hardware. The UD carbon frame offers two geometry options courtesy of a flip-chip at the lower shock mount, although the 'low' position is still a fair bit higher than most brands' 'normal'.

At a smidge under 470mm (large), the Primer S's reach and 65-degree head angle are in line with its peers, but the 73.8-degree effective seat tube angle is too tipped-back for our tastes. The chainstays are also longer than average, at 441mm, and seem to exert a lot of leverage on the links joining the two chassis halves – more on that later.

These counter-rotating short links form a 'virtual pivot point' set-up, dubbed 'JS-Tuned' after Intense's founder and CEO, Jeff Steber. The suspension works much like Santa Cruz's old VPP design, before they switched to a lower-link-driven system a few seasons back.

THE KIT

There's a chunk of e*thirteen gear here, including a 35mm carbon bar, Vario dropper post and Helix Plus cranks. It's all sorted and solid kit, including the heavy-duty LG1 enduro rims. Magura's MT7 brakes work fine, but the lever-blade shape won't be everyone's favourite, and a smaller 180mm rear rotor means brute stopping power isn't huge. The kit choice that has the biggest impact is having Öhlins suspension at both ends. This brings the brand's unique damped and controlled feel to the Primer, and defines the ride – especially the smooth and fluid TTX shock, which keeps the bike stuck to the ground like the proverbial do-dah to a blanket.

THE RIDE

Öhlins' suspension being the dominant force in the Primer's personality is a good thing, especially in terms of downhill performance and control. The damping scrubs the worst edges off anything in your path, and grip levels are phenomenal. It's a bit like riding on plasticine tyres, especially out back, leaving the Intense feeling planted on any terrain and unshakeable when things get hectic.

How much this performance is down to Öhlins' damping or to Intense's

JARGON

COUNTER-ROTATING LINKS

Intense's JS-Tuned design uses two short links that move in opposite directions to shift the 'virtual' pivot point of the suspension as the bike moves through its travel.

U.D.

Stands for 'unidirectional' – a carbon construction where the fibres are laid out in straight lines with no gaps between them, rather than forming a woven patchwork. Creates great strength in a given direction.

HIGHS

Distinctive Öhlins suspension feel helps the bike mould to the terrain and offers outstanding grip

–

The only cockpit on test we didn't need to fiddle with

LOWS

Handling never quite feels intuitive and natural enough

–

Dated seat tube angle and high ride feel

frame and linkage design is hard to say, but, either way, it doesn't impact on pedalling prowess. Much like the older Santa Cruz VPP set-up, the JS-Tuned system provides a distinct surge on each downstroke and an efficient feel when accelerating, despite the Primer S having the heaviest wheels on test and a draggy/sticky 3C MaxxGrip-compound Maxxis Minion front tyre.

This attribute would be easier to milk if the dated seated climbing position didn't tip your weight back. Thankfully, the Intense is still a pretty good technical climber when standing up or inched forward on the saddle. With plenty of tyre bite and traction, it can get up pretty much anything, aided by the big 51t dinner-plate cassette.

When linking corners or slamming through berms, the Primer S feels a little high off the ground, leaving your feet higher than we'd prefer. We found the steering could also be a little vague, causing us to exit high g-force berms or long, sweeping corners in slightly the wrong place – an issue we didn't have on the other bikes. Our hunch is that there's some chassis twist between the frame halves or behind the head tube. The Intense is also not the easiest bike to pop, manual and generally chuck about.

This is partly a consequence of the calm and controlled Öhlins ride, which we mostly appreciated, but in these situations dulls things down and contributes to handling that's almost the opposite of the Pivot Switchblade's. While that bike flits around like a bee waiting to sting, the Primer S floats over bumps like a butterfly.

Ultimately, the Intense can't make up its mind what it wants to be. It's too muted-feeling, stuck to the floor and vague in terms of handling to be a really nimble and reactive trail bike, yet not slackened-out, stiff and bombproof enough to hang with the enduro crowd, even with the superb control and grip of the Öhlins suspension. If price is your priority, though, you're getting easily as good a spec here as on its rivals, for at least two-and-a-half grand less.

MBUK VERDICT ★★★☆☆

The Primer S offers superb control and grip, plus a great spec, but isn't the most cohesive overall package

FOR A LOT LESS

Intense Primer 29 Pro £4,999
For nearly a grand less, you get the same frame, paired with a 150mm Fox fork and air shock, plus minor kit downgrades

FOR LESS AGAIN

Intense Primer 29 Expert £3,999
As above, but with more cost-saving parts, including Performance-level Fox kit and SRAM NX Eagle gearing.

DETAILS

WIDE BOY
Pivot's 157mm rear hub spacing allows for a broader spoke brace angle and stronger wheel

UPRIGHT CHARACTER
The Switchblade has the steepest head angle on test and is the least stable at high speed

TOUCH OF BLING
A top-end Shimano XTR rear mech is nice to have, but lower-tier drivetrain parts feature elsewhere

PIVOT SWITCHBLADE 29 PRO

£8,100 Lightweight trail bike with enduro attitude

JARGON

DW-LINK
Named after creator Dave Weagle, this twin-link suspension design has spawned many imitators and is one of the longest-running and most successful set-ups around.

HUB ENGAGEMENT
How quickly a rear hub reacts to pedalling inputs, measured by the number of points in the revolution of the wheel where drive can be engaged. Fewer points of engagement equals more lag under pedal power.

Launched in 2020, the sleek and compact Switchblade still looks bang up to date. This lightweight carbon bike has what Pivot call 'enduro' angles – although in the past three years geometry trends have shifted, and we think it's now positioned more in the 'trail' bracket.

THE FRAME

In terms of construction, Pivot go further than most to justify their pricing. Renowned for light frames, they've developed a special way of moulding higher-grade carbon fibre to reduce wrinkles and resin pooling. Like Yeti, they also tune the torsional and vertical stiffness of each size.

Further pieces in Pivot's weight-saving puzzle are a press-fit BB92 bottom bracket and SuperBoost+ (157mm) hub spacing. This set-up allows increased frame stiffness, 12mm more tyre clearance and an opportunity for shorter stays. The resulting broader rear hub flange makes for a stiffer wheel. Mud clearance is huge, too, and you can forget about issues with heel rub.

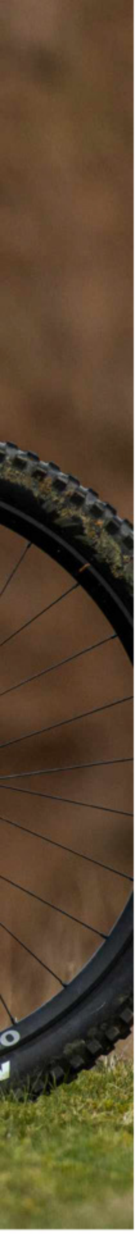
The DW-Link suspension set-up delivers 142mm of rear-wheel travel, controlled by a vertically-positioned, trunnion-mount Fox shock. Frame features include a SRAM universal derailleur hanger (UDH) and space within the front triangle for a full-size water bottle.

While the roomy 475mm reach (large) sounds up-to-date and is only 10mm shorter than that of the Yeti, that number doesn't tell the whole story. With its higher BB and steeper head angle (which equates to a shorter wheelbase), the Switchblade feels much smaller than the SB140, despite a more tilted seat tube angle, which pulls your hips further back. Pivot tout it as blending trail and enduro geometry, but even for a trail bike, the 66.5-degree head angle (in the highest setting) is steep and quick-steering by today's norms.

THE KIT

While the frame is ported for Fox's auto-adjust LiveValve system, this build has a standard Fox Float X shock with no electronics. Along with the fork and Transfer dropper post, it has the shiny gold Kashima coating that indicates Factory-level kit. The 36 fork has the brand's best GRIP2 damper, too.

At just over 1,900g a pair, DT Swiss's XM 1700 wheels aren't quite as weight-focused as the frame. We rate them, but they have slower hub engagement than some, and you can feel the lag when changing gear on techy climbs. The mostly Shimano XT drivetrain is sensible, reliable kit, although the Race Face Æffect R cranks aren't the level of bling you'd hope for on an £8k+ rig. We swapped the 50mm stem for a 40mm one to make the steering more intuitive and precise, and changed the fat grips.



HIGHS

Frame is one of the lightest in this category

–

Factory-level Fox 36 fork leaves little to be desired

LOWS

Geometry – especially the seated climbing position – feels a bit dated

–

Slightly hectic ride character makes it a lot of fun, but less experienced riders will likely prefer a safer, more surefooted feel

THE RIDE

Whoever came up with the name Switchblade for this engaging bike deserves a bonus – it's reactive and responsive, whether going up or down. Weight the front tyre properly and you can fire from side-to-side on the trails so fast it almost blurs your vision.

These energetic traits extend to climbing and sprinting, too – the DW-link suspension has good traction and, while there's some mild bob, it pedals so efficiently that it almost helps the upwards crank arm over the summit of each revolution. There's a sense of basic raw speed, along with tons of bite into loose surfaces, which means that if you stand up and mash uphill, the Pivot rewards efforts and doesn't sap energy. On tarmac or fireroad climbs, it's a different story. The seated position is too rearwards on the steepest grades, and we had to push the saddle forward to get into a comfy position. Another vague niggle on seated climbs is that the front tyre can feel a bit light and wandering.

Overall, the Switchblade is almost the opposite of a super-stable, overly calm, long/low/slack modern trail bike. We added more low-speed compression damping than usual to the rear suspension, which feels a bit too fluid and bouncy at times, especially compared to the amazingly-controlled Öhlins suspension on the Intense. But with a higher BB and steeper head angle speeding up the handling, and the lightweight frame not feeling absolutely rock-solid stiff, the Switchblade can sometimes still feel a bit overworked in rough enduro terrain.

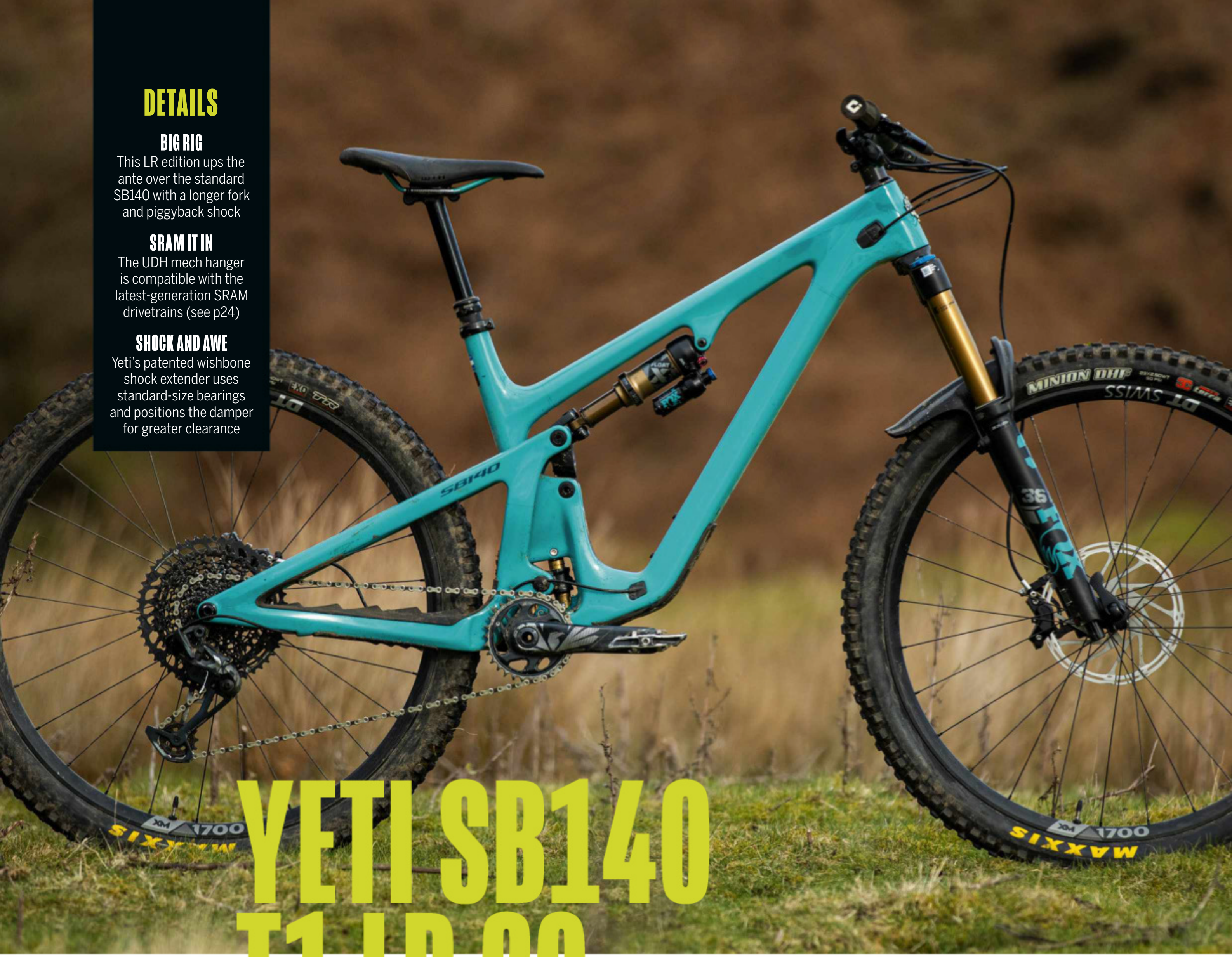
Fast, lightweight and easy to chuck around, there's a whiff of a previous-generation trail bike here. That's no insult, though, as in a sea of enduro clones it's refreshing to ride a 29er with this much zest; at times it's hard to believe you're not rolling on 650b wheels. This poppy little bike-meets-dodgem is edgy, lively and fun, but not best optimised for 'hold on and survive' lines or taking chances on the bleeding edge of grip. Plenty of cheaper bikes offer similar performance and attitude.

MBUK VERDICT ★★★½☆

Living up to its billing, Pivot's Switchblade is a sharp tool for cutting through the trails

FOR A LITTLE LESS

Pivot Switchblade 29 Ride SLX/XT
£6,750
Opting for Performance-level Fox kit and Shimano SLX saves you over a grand.



DETAILS

BIG RIG
This LR edition ups the ante over the standard SB140 with a longer fork and piggyback shock

SRAM IT IN
The UDH mech hanger is compatible with the latest-generation SRAM drivetrains (see p24)

SHOCK AND AWE
Yeti's patented wishbone shock extender uses standard-size bearings and positions the damper for greater clearance

YETI SB140 T1 LR 29

£8,499 Stunning new ride with unique Switch Infinity suspension and refined full-carbon chassis

Sitting roughly mid-pack in a range of SB Yetis, the brand's latest trail bike has gained 10mm of travel over the SB130 it replaces. The 'Lunch Ride' version here uses a 160mm fork (rather than 150mm) and a Fox Float X piggyback shock to add more hard-charging capability.

THE FRAME

It's hard not to drool over the slick lines of this frame. The carbon layup is specific to each size, to keep flex and torsional stiffness consistent. On this T-series model, Yeti use their higher-grade 'Turq' fibres, to save weight. The chainstays grow with each step up in size, too, and the actual seat angle increases, so the riding position should remain dialled, whether the rider is tall or short.

The SB140 uses a compact version of Yeti's Switch Infinity suspension system – essentially a single-pivot design, although that pivot moves up and down on Kashima-coated sliders, to increase anti-squat and combat bob, then reduce pedal kickback deeper in the stroke. New seals and bearings give reduced friction and longer life.

Yeti have made the zone above the (now threaded) BB much neater, plus there's 34mm more rock clearance underneath thanks to new frame shaping, protected by a fresh dual-density guard. Thick, rubberised chainslap protection extends all around the stays and, combined with tunnelled internal cable routing, ensures the ride is silent. The seat tube is shorter than on the SB130, to accommodate longer-stroke droppers.

Very roomy in the cockpit and with marginally longer chainstays than most bikes, the SB140 has a generous wheelbase. It's a bit lower than most frames, too, with its stubby head tube and short stack height, exaggerated by a lower-rise bar, and the head angle is slightly steeper. There aren't any geometry adjustment features, either.

THE KIT

The spec is what you'd hope for on an £8.5k bike. Strong, reliable DT Swiss XM 1700 wheels are shod with proven Maxxis tyres. Four-piston SRAM Code brakes have all the adjustment and power you need, while the brand's X01 Eagle drivetrain has stiff cranks and crisp shifting. You also get a well-shaped, 780mm Yeti carbon bar. The ride position felt slightly stretched with a 50mm stem, though, so we swapped in a 40mm one to tune the fit and tip the rider's centre of gravity back.

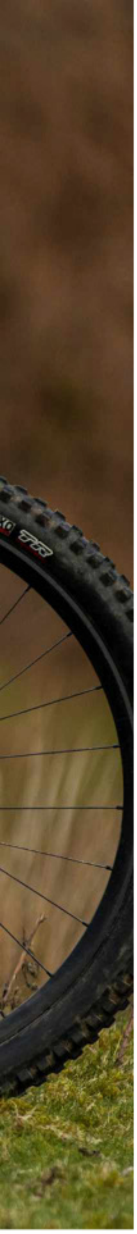
THE RIDE

Rolling fast and smooth over chopped-up ground is the well-damped SB140 chassis' signature move. Roomy and stable, it really trucks along on mellower downhill gradients and excels at maintaining pace over small roots, embedded stones and lumps. There's a deep feel to the suspension for a 140mm bike, and it's active and lively, but also hard to bottom-out harshly,

JARGON

SIZE-SPECIFIC
Each frame size has its own chainstay length, seat tube angle and even carbon fibre tune, to ensure all height riders get the same performance.

FIT GUIDE
Unlike most brands, who recommend a smaller frame than most riders will really want, Yeti's size guide is spot-on.



even when sending it off drops or jumps. The flipside to this supple feel is tons of traction and ascending bite, so it devours steep, technical climbs with great grip and good pedalling efficiency. Its seated climbing position is sorted, too.

In terms of handling, the SB140 encourages you to weight the front tyre and let the back end follow. This suits its personality – it's a smooth all-rounder that floats and slinks through terrain, rather than a wannabe enduro bruiser that you hang off the back of. In fact, when you attack steeper enduro tracks, a chink appears in the Yeti's armour. We craved a bit more support deeper in the travel, so played around with the air pressure and added more low-speed compression damping and a bigger volume spacer in the shock.

This was mostly to counter the sensation of using too much travel and the front wheel coming up a bit light when exiting steep bucket turns or berms. Our experiments didn't really work, though, and added a harsher ramp-up that was noticeable on rocky terrain. Yeti likely have it right then, but maybe the moderately progressive suspension and the way the Switch Infinity pivot reverses direction deeper in the stroke, to dial anti-squat right off for freer suspension movement, have something to do with it.

There's a sense that the Yeti is a bit harder to perfectly dial in for all kinds of terrain than some of its rivals. However, this is mostly nit-picking, as for the majority of trail riding, it feels spot-on. Yes, it's a little quicker-steering than some more slackened-out rigs, but it always rides lighter than the scales suggest and the supple frame has a high-quality, muted feel at speed.

If you ride aggressively, slamming into and squaring off turns, and charging down steep hand-cut trails, then the SB140 LR maybe isn't the super-stiff bruiser for you. But the Yeti delivers as a sophisticated all-rounder that can dance through really rough ground at slacker pitches and also climb and pedal with plenty of pace and traction.

HIGHS

Comfortable, efficient and versatile all-rounder

–

Slick frame styling keeps the chassis out of the way of knees and heels, and the finish befits the steep price

LOWS

Expensive compared to equivalent bikes from more mainstream brands

–

Not as light as some other 'pure' trail bikes

MBUK VERDICT ★★★★☆

This LR edition ups the capability of the SB140 without losing the ride-all-day vibe that makes it so versatile

FOR THE SAME PRICE

Yeti SB140 T1 LR 27.5 £8,499

The same bike with smaller 650b wheels, which should improve manoeuvrability but give a slightly less smooth ride

FOR A LITTLE LESS

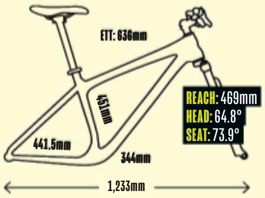
Yeti SB140 C2 LR 29 £6,999

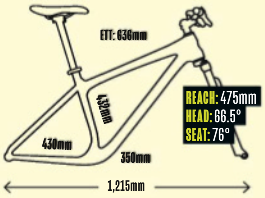
Twenty-niner with a slightly heavier C-series carbon frame and a number of spec downgrades

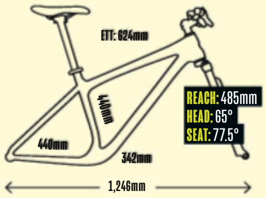
SPEC DECK

	INTENSE PRIMER S	**PIVOT SWITCHBLADE PRO**	**YETI SB140 T1 LR 29**
PRICE	£5,799	£8,100	£8,499
DISTRIBUTOR	https://uk.intensecycles.com	https://saddleback.co.uk	www.silverfish-uk.com
WEIGHT	15.4kg	14.1kg	14.7kg
FRAME	UD carbon fibre monocoque, 140mm travel	'Hollow Core' carbon fibre, 142mm travel	'Turq' carbon fibre, 140mm travel
SIZES (*TESTED)	S, M, L*, XL	XS, S, M, L*, XL	S, M, L*, XL, XXL
FORK	Öhlins RXF 36 M.2, 160mm travel	Fox 36 Factory GRIP2, 160mm travel	Fox 36 Factory GRIP2, 160mm travel
SHOCK	Öhlins TTX22M coil	Fox Float X Factory air	Fox Float X Factory air
HEADSET	Cane Creek 40	Pivot sealed	Cane Creek 40
WHEELS: HUBS	e*thirteen LG1 Enduro	DT Swiss 350	DT Swiss 350
RIMS	e*thirteen LG1 Enduro	DT Swiss XM 1700	DT Swiss XM 1700
SPOKES	Stainless steel, black	DT Swiss, butted	DT Swiss, butted
TYRES	Maxxis Minion DHF 3C MaxxGrip EXO 29x2.5in (f), Maxxis Minion DHR II 3C MaxxTerra EXO+ 29x2.4in (r)	Maxxis Minion DHF 3C MaxxTerra EXO 29x2.5in (f), Maxxis Minion DHR II 3C EXO 29x2.4in (r)	Maxxis Assegai 3C MaxxGrip EXO+ 29x2.5in (f), Maxxis Minion DHR II 3C MaxxTerra EXO+ 27.5x2.4in (r)
CRANKSET/BB	e*thirteen Helix Plus/e*thirteen	Race Face Æffect R/Race Face	SRAM X01 Eagle/SRAM DUB
MECH(S)	Shimano Deore XT	Shimano XTR	SRAM X01 Eagle
SHIFTER(S)	Shimano Deore XT (1x12)	Shimano Deore XT (1x12)	SRAM GX Eagle (1x12)
CASSETTE/CHAIN	Shimano Deore XT, 11-51t/Shimano XT	Shimano Deore XT, 10-51t/Shimano XT	SRAM GX Eagle, 10-52t/SRAM GX Eagle
BRAKES	Magura MT7 Pro, 203/180mm rotors	Shimano Deore XT M8120, 203/180mm rotors	SRAM Code RSC, 200/180mm rotors
BAR/STEM/GRIPS	e*thirteen Race carbon, 800mm/e*thirteen Plus, 40mm/ODI	Pivot Team carbon, 780mm/Pivot Team, 50mm/Pivot	Yeti carbon, 780mm/Burgtec Enduro MK3, 50mm/ODI
SEATPOST/SADDLE	e*thirteen Vario Infinite, 180mm/SDG Radar	Fox Transfer Factory, 175mm/WTB Volt Pro	Fox Transfer Factory, 175mm/WTB Silverado

DIMENSIONS







MBUK VERDICT

The Primer S offers superb control and grip, plus a great spec, but isn't the most cohesive overall package

★★★☆☆

MBUK VERDICT

Living up to its billing, the Switchblade is a sharp tool for cutting through the trails

★★★½☆

MBUK VERDICT

This LR edition ups the capability of the SB140 without losing the ride-all-day vibe that makes it so versatile

★★★★☆

Winner MBUK

YETI SB140 T1 LR 29

Yeti's SB140 is the winning bike here, because it's the most versatile and smoothest-handling. Uphill, it's as traction-rich and assured as Pivot's Switchblade but with a superior rider position, while downhill, it has a more planted ride. It sure looks pretty, too! Whether all that's enough to justify its hefty price premium, considering that overall performance isn't leagues ahead of plenty of cheaper equivalents, is up for debate.

The Switchblade is a lot of fun, making it a good option if you're of the mindset that the latest slacked-out, super-long and stable machines have lost some desirable liveliness and flickability. It keeps you engaged on easier trails and rewards jibbing around, but can get a bit too manic at warp speeds on lairier trails.

You can't argue with the value for money offered by Intense. The Primer S also delivers amazing traction and control, thanks to its Öhlins suspension and sticky/grippy Maxxis front tyre, so you can charge hard and remain well-shielded from danger. Crank strokes really drive you forward, too, but the slack seat tube angle is annoying on longer climbs and for some reason, we didn't always sync with the steering.

Ultimately, none of these bikes feels as up-to-date and well-rounded as the likes of Merida's new One-Forty or Specialized's Stumpjumper EVO, both of which can be found for much less cash.

NEXT MONTH

2023 BIKE OF THE YEAR

Thirty-two bikes tested in four categories – trail, enduro, e-MTB and budget. Don't miss it!

On sale 12 May

GROUPTEST TRAIL HELMETS

Nine open-face lids tested for coverage, fit and comfort, so you can hit the trails confident your bonce is protected

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A helmet is the most important piece of cycling equipment you'll buy. While they're not always the most exciting or drool-worthy items of kit, it's crucial to find one that fits well and offers plenty of protection – it could save your life!

So, how do bike helmets actually work? First, they spread the impact force over a larger area – something that's especially important if you hit a sharp rock, for example – and then they slow it down, causing it to take milliseconds longer to reach your head. This smooths out and reduces the peak impact spike that, in the worst case, can cause brain damage. That fractional delay may not seem like it'll make much of a difference, but does.

Inside every helmet is an expanded-foam (EPS) liner, designed to crumple to destruction to extend the impact time. Many brands now use different foam densities to make this even more effective. Koroyd 'straws' are another recent development – thin plastic cylinders designed to deform on impact, spread the load and reduce that peak 'impulse'. Rotational forces can be dangerous, too, though, which is where tech such as MIPS (Multi-directional Impact Protection System) comes in. To combat your head being forcibly twisted, the various MIPS set-ups and competing designs allow for some rotation between the liner and the helmet pads. Not all lids have this extra safety tech, but there's usually a small sticker (yellow, in the case of MIPS) that'll tell you if it's there.

To protect the easily-damaged foam, the liner is wrapped in a hard microshell (usually plastic, on trail helmets). This adds a little extra protection from knocks and should extend the life of the lid. Make sure you replace your helmet after any impact, and every few years (check the manufacturer's recommendation) otherwise, as UV material degradation and general use/abuse will reduce its effectiveness.

To put the helmets here to the test, we wore them through the depths of winter and into spring. We scored these lids based on protective features, coverage, ventilation, comfort, price and the small details that make a difference. Read on to see what we recommend.

JARGON

ANTIMICROBIAL PADDING

Some brands apply a treatment to the helmet's padding to help stop the onset of odour. Either way, it's a good idea to wash your pads every few rides.

FIT SYSTEM

Brands have their own names for these and slight differences in design, but they ultimately all do the same thing – with the aid of a dial, they allow you to tighten an internal band ('cradle') to fine-tune the fit of the helmet.

M.I.P.S.

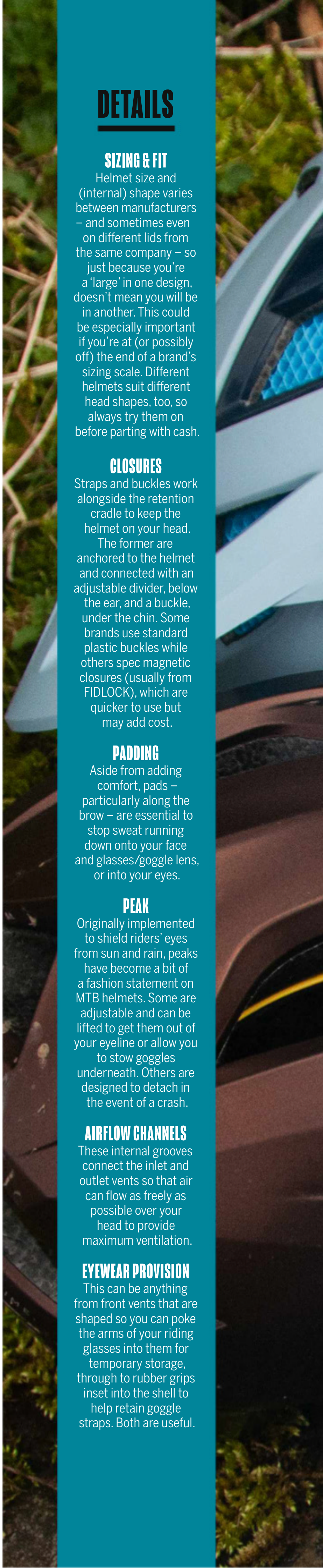
Multi-directional Impact Protection System. A low-friction poly-carbonate layer fitted behind the pads that allows them to move independently of the helmet liner, reducing rotational forces in the event of an impact.

M.I.P.S. SPHERICAL

Another system designed to reduce rotational forces in the event of a crash. MIPS Spherical helmets sandwich the slip-plane between two layers of protective EPS foam, rather than between the liner and your bonce.

VIRGINIA TECH

The testing done in Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University's helmet lab is more comprehensive than the standard tests all lids must pass (in the UK, BS EN 1078, which only covers flat and kerb impacts). Helmets are scored out of five.



DETAILS

SIZING & FIT

Helmet size and (internal) shape varies between manufacturers – and sometimes even on different lids from the same company – so just because you're a 'large' in one design, doesn't mean you will be in another. This could be especially important if you're at (or possibly off) the end of a brand's sizing scale. Different helmets suit different head shapes, too, so always try them on before parting with cash.

CLOSURES

Straps and buckles work alongside the retention cradle to keep the helmet on your head. The former are anchored to the helmet and connected with an adjustable divider, below the ear, and a buckle, under the chin. Some brands use standard plastic buckles while others spec magnetic closures (usually from FIDLOCK), which are quicker to use but may add cost.

PADDING

Aside from adding comfort, pads – particularly along the brow – are essential to stop sweat running down onto your face and glasses/goggle lens, or into your eyes.

PEAK

Originally implemented to shield riders' eyes from sun and rain, peaks have become a bit of a fashion statement on MTB helmets. Some are adjustable and can be lifted to get them out of your eyeline or allow you to stow goggles underneath. Others are designed to detach in the event of a crash.

AIRFLOW CHANNELS

These internal grooves connect the inlet and outlet vents so that air can flow as freely as possible over your head to provide maximum ventilation.

EYEWEAR PROVISION

This can be anything from front vents that are shaped so you can poke the arms of your riding glasses into them for temporary storage, through to rubber grips inset into the shell to help retain goggle straps. Both are useful.

ENDURA
BLUEGRASS
Mips

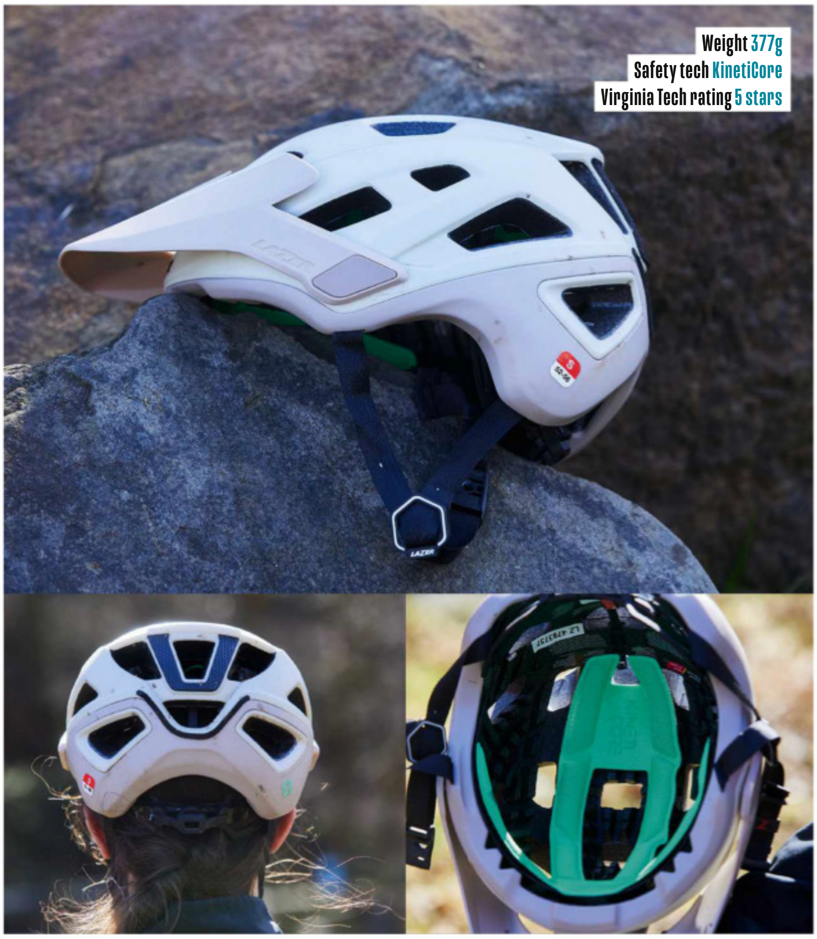
MEET THE TESTER

LUKE MARSHALL
TECHNICAL WRITER

Luke has been hitting mountain bike trails for the past 25 years, from racing World Cup DH in the 2000s to competing in the Enduro World Series last year. He's never happier than when riding rough, rowdy trails, which puts him in the perfect position to know what makes a good lid, and to put this lot through their paces.

LAZER JACKAL KINETICORE

£159.99 www.freewheel.co.uk



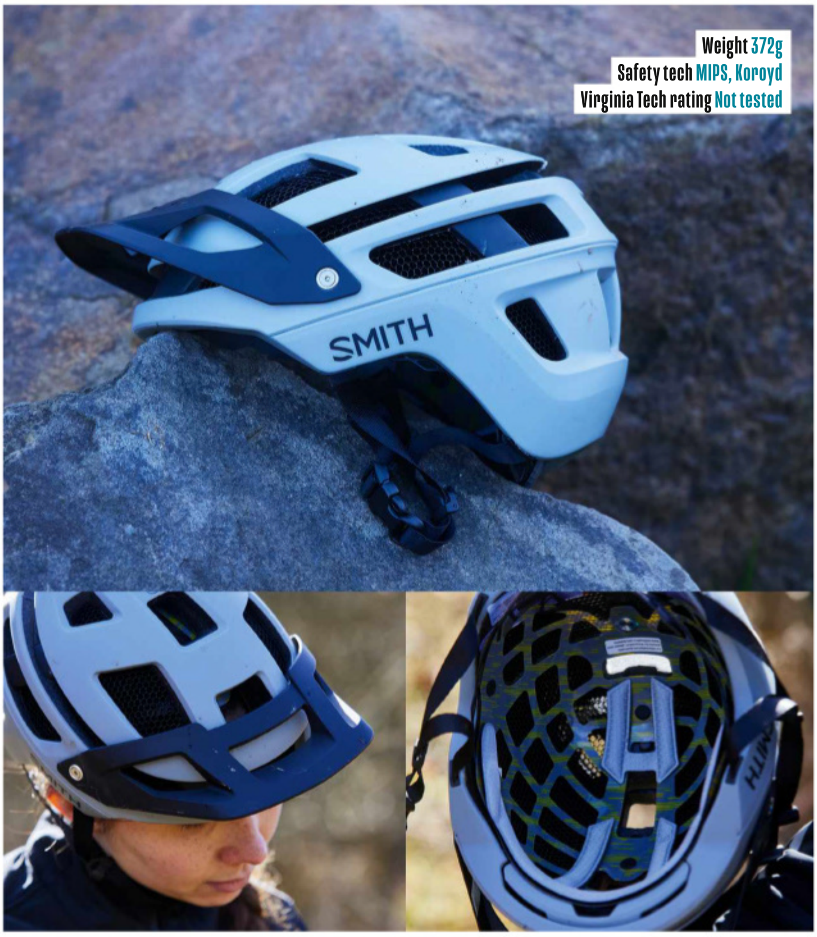
Weight 377g
Safety tech KinetiCore
Virginia Tech rating 5 stars

Combining subtle styling and a sleek shape with ample coverage, the Jackal feels light to wear. Lazer's unique KinetiCore technology is claimed to boast both direct and rotational impact protection in one design, to save weight and increase airflow, and does away with the need for a separate MIPS layer. The Belgian brand have taken inspiration from car impact zones and trimmed the EPS foam to replicate this concept. Inside the lid are raised blocks of EPS that sit directly against your head and form a crumple zone. Each one can deform in any direction, helping this design to score five stars from Virginia Tech. The Jackal comes up trumps on ventilation, too, with 19 vents, an open design and fairly large front vents that allow air to flow unrestricted through the lid. It doesn't quite blow the Specialized Ambush 2 away, but is among the best here. The retention system offers 14 height positions so you can really fine-tune the fit. Due to the KinetiCore, there's minimal padding, but it's still comfy, if not plush. The three-position peak leaves space to stash eyewear, and there are rubber grippers at the back for goggles. One niggle is that riding glasses don't sit that comfortably, because the arms tend to catch on the cradle behind the ears. The flimsy straps make it feel cheap, but it does come with an accessory mount that attaches with Velcro straps.

MBUK ★★★☆☆

SMITH FOREFRONT 2

£199 www.smithoptics.com



Weight 372g
Safety tech MIPS, Koroyd
Virginia Tech rating Not tested

Smith's updated top-end trail lid has all the right details on paper and plenty of modern tech. However, it's simply not as comfortable or cool as other helmets that cost less – despite now having 20 vents – and for almost £200, we'd expect near flawless performance. This sleek design has an in-moulded shell that wraps under the rim to see off the bumps and bashes of everyday use. Inside, it features a MIPS liner. Smith are also one of two brands in this test to use Koroyd – a lattice of straw-like tubes, which is claimed to crumple more on impact compared to standard EPS foam. A thin layer of single-density EPS forms the structural skeleton of the helmet and, inside, most of the air inlets and outlets are filled with Koroyd, except for the central open vents. While better ventilated than the Endura lid (which also uses Koroyd), the Forefront is middling overall in terms of airflow. Smith's VaporFit retention system is height-adjustable, with three positions to tailor the fit. The antimicrobial pads offer sweat-activated odour control, but the padding is minimal and not particularly plush. For us, this is the lid's biggest weakness, and means we wouldn't choose it for a long day in the saddle. In its favour, the Forefront integrates well with goggles (the three-position peak can be raised so you can stash these below) and most glasses, although we found longer arms would interfere with the shell.

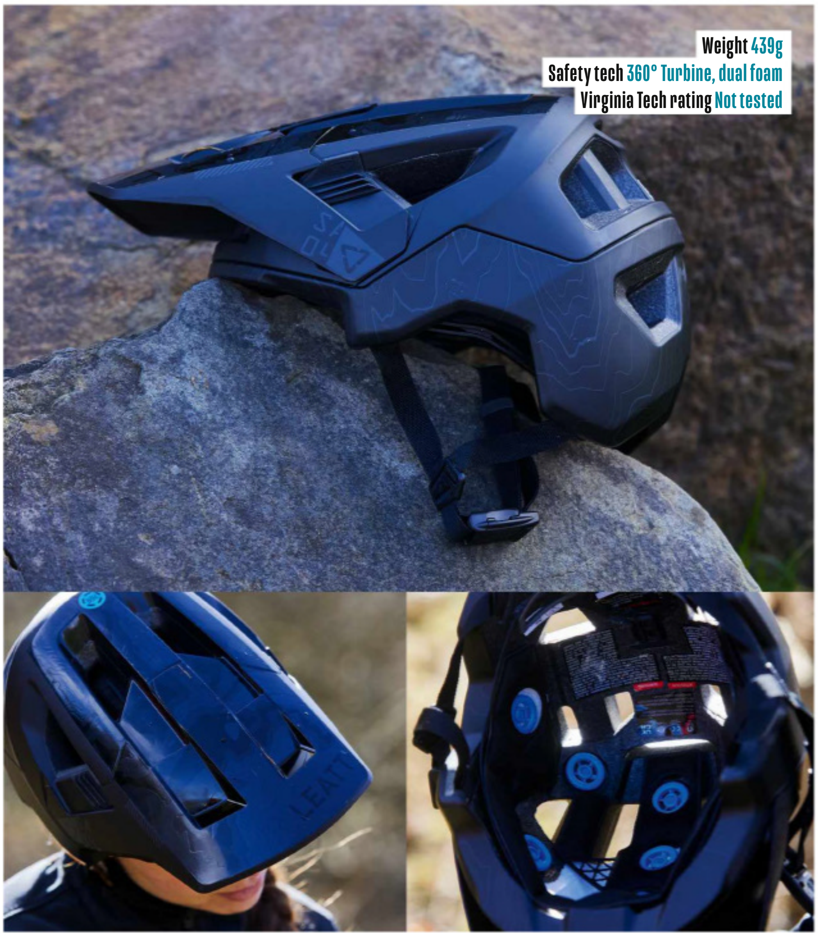
MBUK ★★★⯪☆

LEATT MTB ALLMTN 4.0

£179.99 www.hotlines-uk.com

Hefty protection and extensive coverage make this one of the most robust helmets on test, but also the heaviest by some way, although its weight is well-balanced and isn't a noticeable hindrance when riding. As Leatt's top-of-the-line open-face lid, it features plenty of tech and smart design choices that give it its high, yet acceptable, price tag. The AllMtn 4.0's liner is made from a mix of EPS and EPO foam, which Leatt claims provides better protection over a wide variety of impact speeds, and is in-moulded with the polymer shell to add durability and enhance structural strength. Rather than MIPS, Leatt employ their own, patented 360° Turbine Technology. This uses Armourgel discs, shaped like mini turbines, which spin and slide to minimise rotational accelerations. Another claimed benefit is that the gel offers added shock absorption. With 18 strategically-placed vents, the Leatt lid is surprisingly cool for its size, and, although the removable padding isn't the plushest on test, it's amply comfortable for all-day rides. The three-position height-adjustable cradle uses a rachet dial, and a FIDLOCK magnetic buckle keeps the straps secure. Other features include a breakaway peak to minimise injury risk (adjustable, with three positions) and glasses ports under the peak, with rubber grips. It's goggle-compatible, too. The sizing seems overly large, so try before you buy.

MBUK ★★★⯪☆



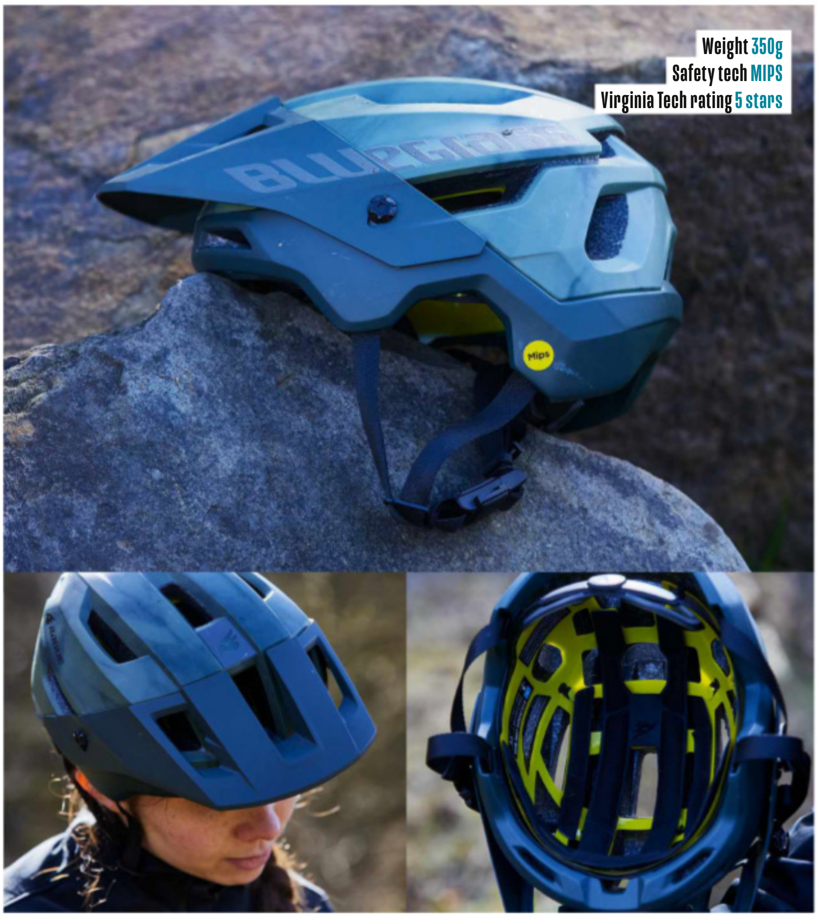
Weight 439g
Safety tech 360° Turbine, dual foam
Virginia Tech rating Not tested

BLUEGRASS ROGUE CORE M.I.P.S.

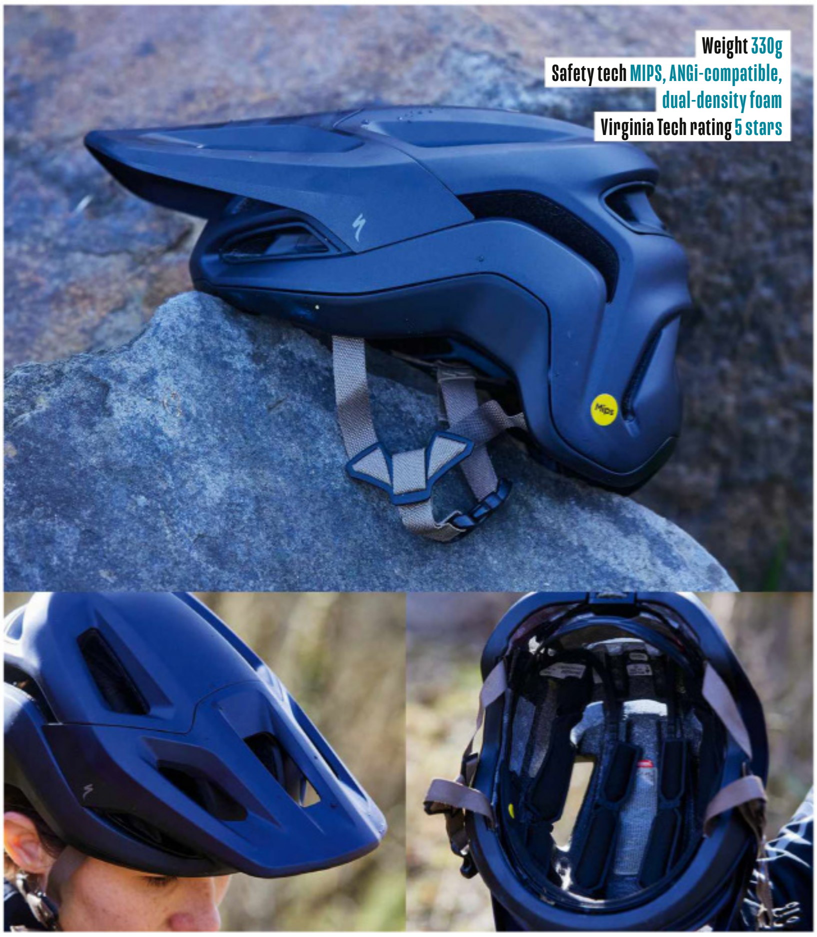
£130 www.met-helmets.com/bluegrass

The Rogue Core is another helmet with a five-star Virginia Tech rating and MIPS. Ventilation is impressive, with 16 air inlets and vents, and plenty of airflow, even at decent speeds. A smart detail is that the forehead padding has holes in the same location as the vents, for uninterrupted airflow. Two of the vents are also positioned to prevent misted glasses. The cradle is height-adjustable, with three vertical positions, and the pads are removable and washable. Comfort is good, thanks to soft rubber padding on the cradle, but it doesn't outshine the Bell for plushness. While the peak isn't breakaway, Bluegrass claim it'll conform to the shape of the helmet in a crash to help mitigate rotational forces. The peak can be pushed up to fit goggles, but isn't indexed, and in its lowest position it's in your field of view. Nifty cut-outs act as a glasses holder, although we wouldn't leave eyewear on the peak when riding rough trails. Also, while many glasses are compatible, it takes some fiddling to get them to rest over the cradle. A handy feature we like is the FIDLOCK buckle that secures the strap – this magnetic closure, also found on several other lids here, can be fastened quickly using a single hand. The Rogue Core's 350g weight is decent and, thanks to distinctive contoured styling, it doesn't look overly large despite its comprehensive coverage at the temples and rear of the head.

MBUK ★★★⯪☆



Weight 350g
Safety tech MIPS
Virginia Tech rating 5 stars



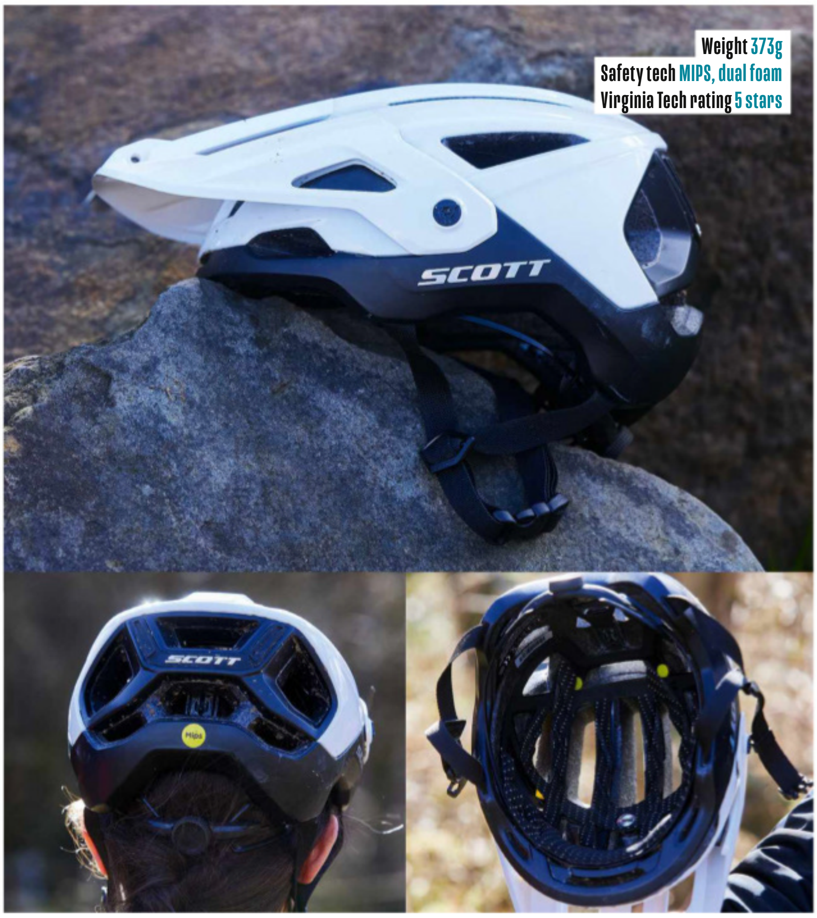
Weight 330g
Safety tech MIPS, ANGi-compatible, dual-density foam
Virginia Tech rating 5 stars

SPECIALIZED AMBUSH 2

£150 www.specialized.com

Yet another helmet that boasts a five-star Virginia Tech rating and MIPS, Specialized's top-priced open-face lid is good value for money. The Ambush 2 delivers impressive protection, especially considering its sleek-looking design and relatively low weight. In fact, it's the lightest on test, followed by the Bluegrass. It provides plenty of coverage, sitting deep down to the rear of the neck, and the liner is constructed from dual-density EPS foam, to add extra protection where needed and save grams where impact resistance is less important. The helmet is also compatible with Specialized's ANGi smart sensor (£45 extra), which is designed to inform contacts if you have a crash, so could be useful if you like to ride remote off-piste stuff or head out on your own. With 18 vents, it's a breezy lid, which will be great for riders who run hot. The removable padding isn't the plushest, though, making it feel averagely comfy. And, despite having five height positions to choose from, we got pressure points when tightening the cradle, and also found that the straps sat awkwardly on our temples. Helmet fit is personal, so it may well suit you better, but we'd advise trying one on before buying. The fixed peak sits well out of your vision when riding and is designed to break away during a crash to minimise rotational forces. There's space below it for eyewear, plus rubber inserts to keep glasses arms secure.

MBUK ★★★½☆



Weight 373g
Safety tech MIPS, dual foam
Virginia Tech rating 5 stars

SCOTT STEGO PLUS

£149.99 www.scott-sports.com

One of the comfiest lids on test, the mid-weight Stego has an impressive five-star Virginia Tech safety rating. In-moulded construction means there's no exposed liner to get damaged, and the single-density EPS is bolstered with PU foam in places to protect more sensitive areas of the head. Overall coverage isn't the most extensive, compared to some other helmets here. This means it isn't bulky, though, and wins points for style and shape with a more refined appearance. Removable and washable padding attaches to the MIPS liner with Velcro, while Scott's Halo retention system has four height positions and a micro-adjust dial to tailor the fit. It comes with two peaks, one standard, one with a GoPro-style mount for cameras and lights. The peak has two positions, providing room for goggles without straying into your line of vision. There are also rubber grips for the goggle strap at the rear of the lid. Ventilation is decent, with 17 air inlets and outlets, but it's not as cool as some. A neat feature is the three ports that channel air down to help prevent your glasses/goggles misting up. There was no cradle interference with a range of riding glasses, but also no dedicated place to stash them; the Stego is more geared towards riders who use goggles. Overall, performance is impressive, but you pay a little more than for other equivalent-quality lids.

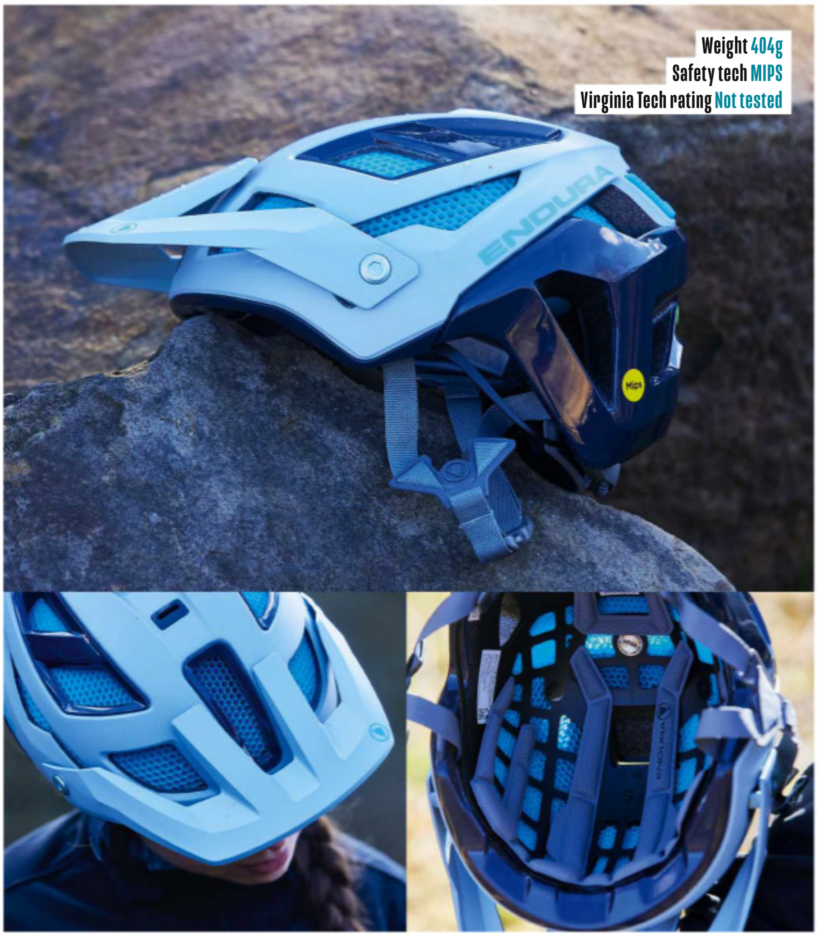
MBUK ★★★½☆

ENDURA MT500 M.I.P.S.

£179.99 www.endurasport.com

Endura's top-spec all-mountain/trail lid is a smart-looking helmet with plenty of safety tech and impressive build quality, although not yet rated by Virginia Tech. It's not super-bulky but still offers some of the best coverage here, and it's a wonderfully comfortable helmet, up there with the Bell Super Air. Apart from the Smith lid, it's the only helmet here to use Koroyd, rather than EPS, for the bulk of its protection. This is effectively a lattice of hexagonal straws, which are fused together and designed to crumple under impact, to absorb crash forces. In common with most lids, the outer shell is made from polycarbonate and is bonded using an in-moulding process to the single-density EPS foam used around the edges of the helmet. To help minimise rotational impact forces, Endura use a MIPS liner integrated with the retention cradle. This has three-position height-adjustment and rubber padding at the back for improved comfort. In terms of ventilation, we didn't find the MT500 to be the best. Air does flow through the helmet, but 12 of the 16 vents are covered by the Koroyd protection and in some of the air inlets, the material isn't aligned perfectly to allow maximum airflow. The three-position peak leaves room in its highest setting to stash eyewear below it, and rubber grippers at the back of the lid help with goggle strap security. A good extra is a clip-on accessory mount.

MBUK ★★★½☆



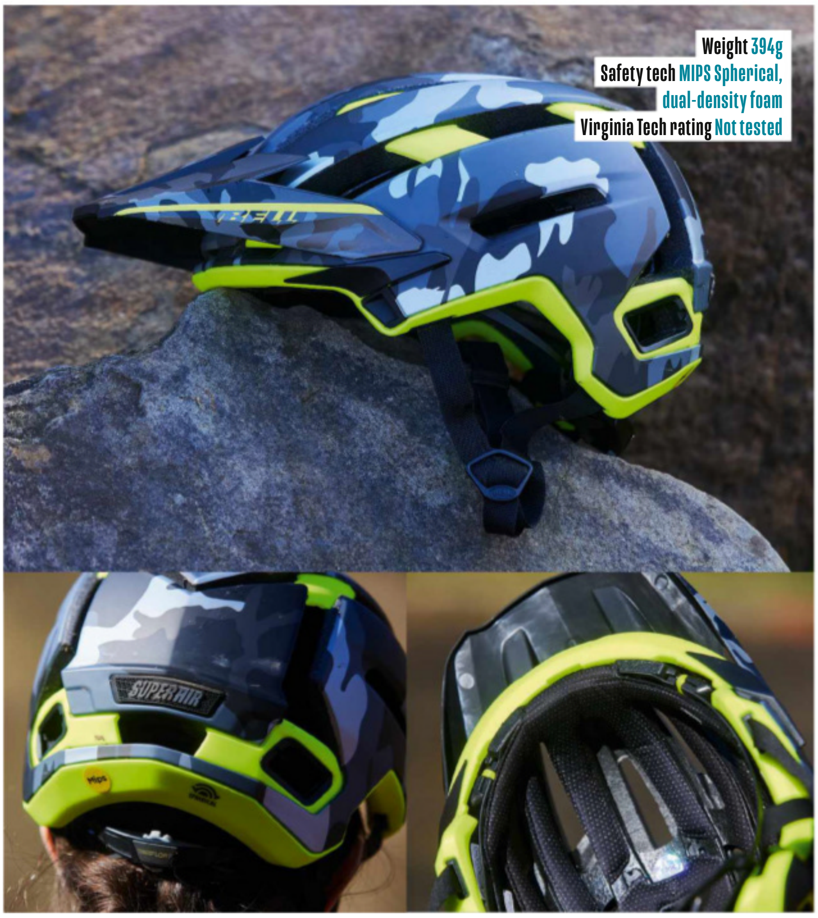
Weight 404g
Safety tech MIPS
Virginia Tech rating Not tested

BELL SUPER AIR SPHERICAL

£224.99 www.bellhelmets.co.uk

Possibly the comfiest helmet around (this or the TLD Flowline), the Super Air is Bell's top trail lid. It gets all the safety features you'd expect for such a high price, including an in-moulded polycarbonate shell, MIPS protection and dual-density EPS (the outer layer is a denser foam to absorb high-speed impacts, the inner one less dense for absorption of lower-speed bumps). Instead of fitting the MIPS layer under the pads, Bell use it to attach the two different foams together. This means the whole inner layer moves independently, with the padding and retention cradle attached to it. Bell claim this MIPS Spherical system is a more robust design, and it certainly feels better than some regular MIPS set-ups, but it's yet to be tested by Virginia Tech. This helmet has a couple more tricks up its sleeve. One of the top vents doubles as a camera or light mount, using the supplied bracket that simply clips in, and you can also add a chinbar (£89.99) to convert it into a lightweight full-face lid. While comfort is excellent, thanks to its shape, removable padding and secure cradle with four height positions, ventilation is middling. It's not a hot helmet, but its small brow vents don't provide as much cooling as others. The peak is adjustable, with three indexed positions and room for goggles/glasses. While it's one of the weightiest lids on test, its outstanding comfort means you don't notice.

MBUK ★★★★☆



Weight 394g
Safety tech MIPS Spherical, dual-density foam
Virginia Tech rating Not tested

Weight 357g
Safety tech MIPS
Virginia Tech rating 5 stars

Value MBUK

Winner MBUK

TROY LEE FLOWLINE M.I.P.S.

£100 https://saddleback.co.uk

This replacement for the acclaimed A1 is a truly great helmet, with plenty of protection and TLD's renowned style and comfort, at a brilliant price. It's available in standard form (tested here) or SE guise, with a few more features. Once riding, we couldn't tell why this helmet retails for £120 less than the old A1. It scores an impressive five-star rating from Virginia Tech and construction quality is as high as you'd expect, with a full-wrap in-mould design to leave no foam exposed at the rim. The Flowline MIPS's sharp and sleek design means it doesn't have a bulky appearance, and while it's not the lightest lid, it isn't noticeably portly either. Coverage is good, too, with plenty of drop at the temples and reasonable extension down the back of the head.

For cost-effective crash protection, the Flowline MIPS is made from single-density EPS, designed to guard against high-speed impacts. (Upgrading to the pricier A2 or A3 gets you dual-density foam.) It also uses a MIPS B-series set-up, where a BOA-style rachet fit system is attached directly to the MIPS liner to help provide a more comfortable and secure fit. As for ventilation, Troy Lee have refined the shape of Flowline MIPS to include above-brow vents, which allow direct airflow into the front of the helmet. While the inlets aren't the biggest, this is an improvement over the £120 more expensive Troy Lee A3, which doesn't feature them. Ventilation is better than the A3, but not class-leading compared to other helmets in this test, such as the Specialized Ambush 2.

The Flowline MIPS scores top marks for fit and comfort – we could ride all day without having to adjust the cradle tension, and most of the time forgot we were wearing the lid. It boasts some of the plushest (removable) padding around and cradled our head with a snug feel and zero pressure points. The cradle has three-position height adjustment, and the peak also features three settings, so you can fine-tune it for keeping sun glare or rain out of your eyes. When it comes to compatibility with glasses, the Flowline scores again. While there's no dedicated storage, you can stash them below the peak.

MBUK ★★★★½

LUKE SAYS

"IN TERMS OF ITS PRICE-TO-PERFORMANCE RATIO, THE FLOWLINE IS TOUGH TO BEAT. SURE, IT MISSES A FEW HIGH-SPEC DETAILS, BUT THESE GO UNNOTICED WHEN YOU'RE THRASHING DOWN THE TRAIL. PLUS, YOU GET T.L.D. STYLE!"

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HOW TO...

GET OUT THERE!

Nils Amelinckx shares his hard-won knowledge of how to remain motivated to ride, whatever life throws at you

Nils Amelinckx is a 35-year-old rider and photographer who regularly contributes to *MBUK*. Five years ago, he was diagnosed with stage-four cancer and was told his illness was incurable. Despite this, Nils continues to ride whenever his illness and treatment allows. He's just launched Rider Resilience, a community interest company that promotes riding bikes as a tool to help navigate stormy waters.

While Nils has been dealt a particularly heavy dose of adversity, we'll all face a degree of hardship at some point in our lives, when our bikes may become temporarily sidelined. So, we reached out to get some tips on how to stay motivated to continue riding through life's trials and tribulations.

FOCUS ON WHAT YOU CAN DO, NOT WHAT YOU CAN'T DO

There are many types of adversity, both physical and psychological. For those facing physical hardship, whether temporary or permanent, it's easy to get dragged down by resenting what you can no longer do. Instead, try to focus on what you can do and scale your riding appropriately. It's much better to finish a multitude of manageable rides with a grin on your face than to fall into a negative spiral by continuously pushing yourself beyond your capabilities. If you're dealing with a more psychological type of hardship, remember you can still get out riding and that it'll likely help to temporarily clear your mind.

DON'T RIDE ALONE

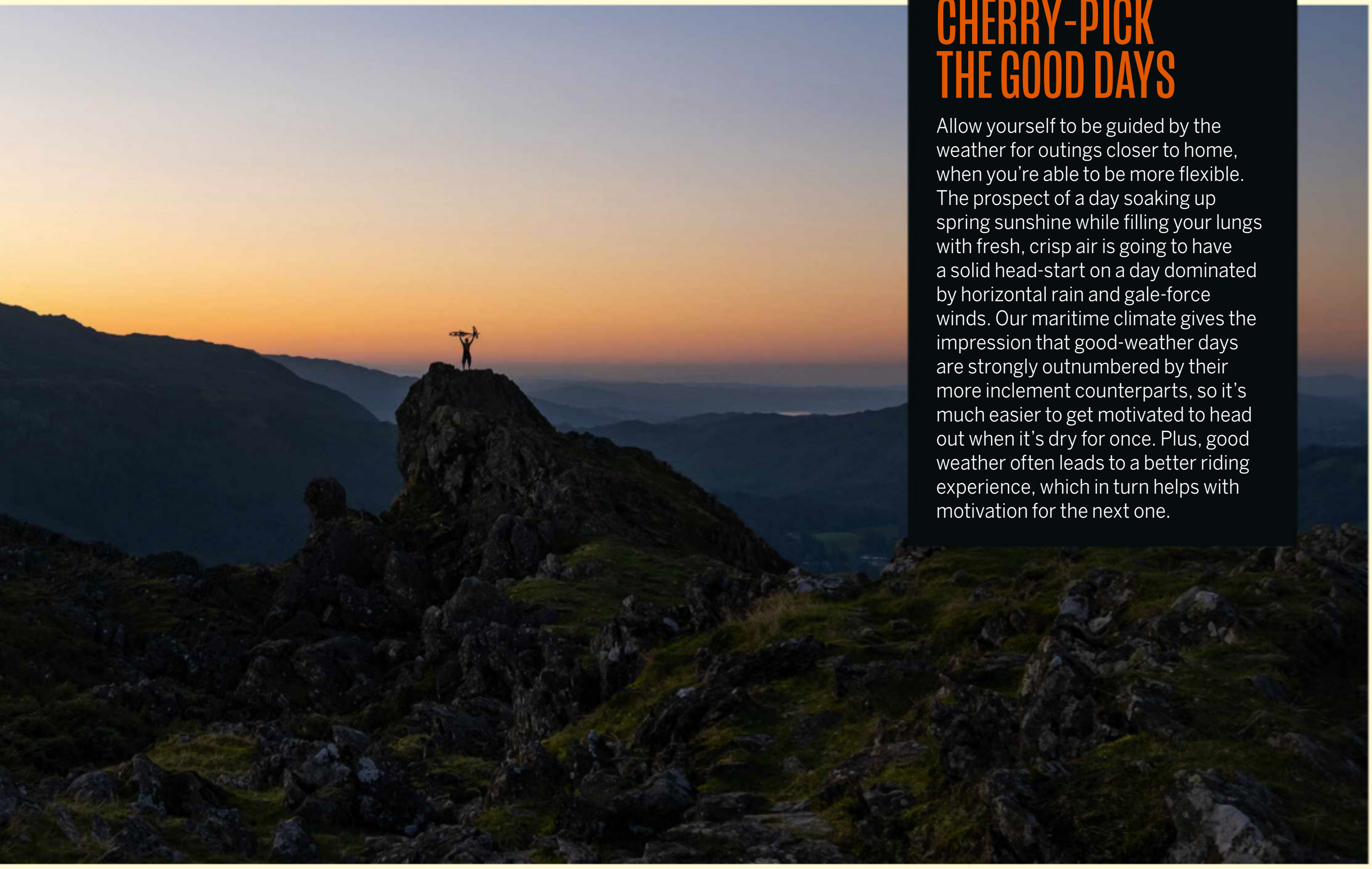
Always plan to ride in a group, ideally made up of two to three people. This adds a little peer pressure – knowing that you can't cancel at the last minute, as this will let your friends down, gives you more of an impetus to turn up, even if every bone in your body wants to bail. Riding as part of a larger group still has some of these benefits, but a no-show tends to have less of an impact on a big group and therefore reduces the feeling of 'guilt' and subsequent drive to head out.

FILL THE CALENDAR

Try not to limit your riding to impulsive loops of your local woods. Where possible, book up events further afield, whether races, weekend trips or full-blown riding holidays in search of dust and sunshine. Entering events will give something to train for, while attending as a spectator can leave you buzzing and be a huge stimulus to grab your bike. Riding trips away require more planning, which has its own benefits, while the change in scenery should be something to look forward to.

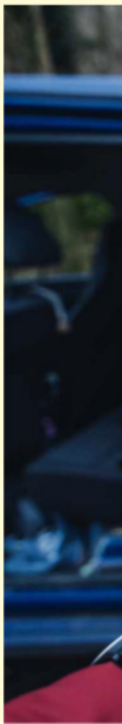
REVEL IN THE PLANNING PROCESS

We're fortunate to have a multitude of tools at our disposal to help us discover great trails. Through magazine articles and the likes of OS Maps, Komoot, Strava, Trailforks, Google Earth, YouTube and Instagram, we can both identify new trails and get up-to-date information on their current condition. Combine this with any local knowledge – plus a decent cafe! – to link together a route that's likely to give you the most smiles per mile, making it easier to get excited about heading out.

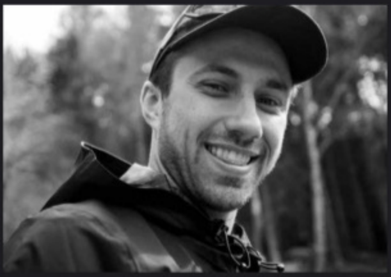


CHERRY-PICK THE GOOD DAYS

Allow yourself to be guided by the weather for outings closer to home, when you're able to be more flexible. The prospect of a day soaking up spring sunshine while filling your lungs with fresh, crisp air is going to have a solid head-start on a day dominated by horizontal rain and gale-force winds. Our maritime climate gives the impression that good-weather days are strongly outnumbered by their more inclement counterparts, so it's much easier to get motivated to head out when it's dry for once. Plus, good weather often leads to a better riding experience, which in turn helps with motivation for the next one.



WHAT DO OTHERS SAY?

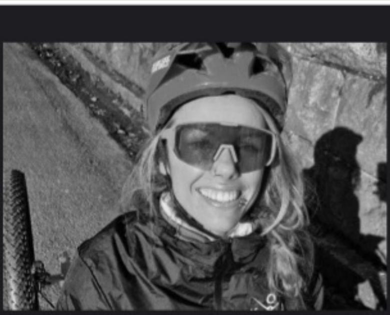


MAGNUS MANSON

Pro DH racer and cancer survivor

@magnusmanson

"Riding has always made me feel free, free from my worries and problems. Facing cancer, riding was one of the few things that would make me forget I was fighting something some people don't make it through. I felt healthy for moments at a time, held onto that with my life, and would always find a way to be on two wheels, to bring happiness to my relatively challenging experience."



CASEY GEMMA

UK rider paralysed following an MTB accident

*@casey_gemma_*

"Mountain biking and being in nature is all I've ever known. It's my go-to when I'm struggling mentally, and helps me to keep a positive and grateful mindset. It brings me a freedom that my wheelchair can't."

ANDY MCKENNA

GoWhere Scotland and StokedOnMS founder, multiple sclerosis fighter

@stokedonms

"When the menace (MS) has got to me, I mostly have a flick through some old pics from a favourite adventure or a local ride with Aneela (my wife) and imagine myself back on the bike when I'm (hopefully!) on form again. I try to just breathe, and to focus on what I can do/hope to do, and not on what I can't do any more."

CHALLENGE YOURSELF

When going through tough times, it can be hard enough to simply get out. If you're unable to venture further afield, motivation may come more easily by challenging yourself and your friends. Could you work on a trail skill, have an impromptu mates' race or extend your usual loop somewhere new? Or make it to the top of the hill in time for sunrise? In the same vein, tracking your progress may act as a stimulus to get out more. Set yourself a height gain or distance target over a predefined period, or simply try to get around your local loop quicker. The sense of achievement will add to the feelgood factor of just getting out.

FOCUS ON THE REWARDS

When you're struggling to get out in the first place, remind yourself of all the benefits associated with riding and focus on those 'rewards'. There are the intangible benefits, such as the feelgood hormones that'll fill your veins and the mental solace that riding delivers as you focus solely on the trail ahead, allowing you to temporarily switch off from the difficulties and worries of life. When it comes to more tangible benefits, there's no shame in planning your route to include a good cafe or finishing the ride with a beer, both of which encourage welcome social interaction. By creating an intrinsic connection through repetition, your mind will start to associate exercise with reward. Just go easy on the cake/pints if you see fitness as an important benefit to riding! ⚙

FELL BREWERY
CUMBRIA

RETAIL THERAPY

Having fresh kit to try out can strongly motivate you to get out. At the highest level, this would be a new bike, but parts swaps are far more attainable and often just as effective. New wheels or a suspension upgrade are often touted as having the greatest effect on a bike's performance. However, simpler changes such as adding volume spacers to your fork or going tubeless can also have a huge impact and stoke your motivation.

GRIME TIME

EXPERT WORKSHOP ADVICE

Braking noise can be caused by a number of things and can often be easily fixed

TECH Q+A

SHUT IT UP

A friend gave me a 180mm brake rotor to replace the 160mm rotor I had on my bike. The power is better, but the braking is really noisy now. There's a 'tinging' sound when the wheel spins, and the brake screeches like anything in the wet. The rotor is a Shimano RT54.

Sam, *Stoke-on-Trent*

There are few things worse than noisy rotors! The 'tinging' will usually be down to one of two things. Most likely, the rotor is slightly warped or bent, or the brake calliper isn't properly centred over it, causing it to rub on the calliper and/or pads. Pull the brake lever gently and spin the wheel. Can you still hear the sound? If so, the rotor is probably rubbing on the calliper. Have a good look at it as it spins. If it seems straight but is hitting one side of the calliper, adjust the position of the calliper on its frame/fork mount so it's properly centred over the rotor. If you can see a bend in the rotor, take some (clean) pliers – or a proper rotor-truing tool if you have one – and try to gently bend it back so it's straight.

The noise could also be caused by part of the rotor catching on the +20mm brake mount adaptor you should have fitted to accommodate the bigger rotor, if this was bolted on a little off-centre. Again, take a look as the wheel spins, and if you can see any contact, readjust as necessary. You may also notice some scuffing on the adapter if this is the case.

One final thing to check is that you're not using metallic (aka 'sintered') brake pads, as the RT54 – which is one of Shimano's lower-budget rotors – is only compatible with resin pads. You should also give the rotor and pads a thorough clean with brake cleaner or isopropyl alcohol to remove any potential contaminants.

FORKING ANNOYING

This might seem like a first-world problem, but I have a RockShox Lyrik fork with Torque Cap-compatible dropouts and a set of wheels that don't have Torque Caps, so it's really annoying getting the front wheel to sit straight so I can put the axle through. It appears that you can't get aftermarket end-caps to fit the wheels. Please tell me there's something that can make life easier...

James, *Warwick*

RockShox's Torque Caps are oversize hub end-caps, designed to increase stiffness and aid wheel insertion/removal. They work well when you have a compatible wheel and fork, but as you've discovered, fitting non-Torque Cap wheels into a Torque Cap fork can be a bit of a pain. Thankfully, there are a couple of quick and cheap solutions.

RockShox make a half-moon spacer to reduce the size of Torque Cap dropouts, with a small bolt to hold it in place. From what we can see, these are compatible with 2023 Pike C1, Lyrik D1 and ZEB A2 Flight Attendant forks. If you don't have one of these, there's a product from German brand Newmen that does the same job, but with an adhesive backing, rather than a bolt. Google 'Newmen TC adapter' and you'll find a set (although you may have to buy them from the EU). Finally, you could try DIYing it – a quick web search suggests an adhesive-backed M22 nylon washer chopped in half should do the job!

IRON OUT THE CREASES

I remember a Grimetime walkthrough from a year or two back where you recommended ironing waterproofs. What was that about? I'm about to give mine a proper clean now that winter is on its way out!

Gaz, *via email*

We did mention that – with a disclaimer! Heat can help reinvigorate the DWR (durable water repellent) coating on some waterproofs, which helps water bead up on the surface and prevents the fabric from 'wetting out'. Make sure to check the garment's care guide, though – some manufacturers suggest a tumble-dry will help, others say not to. In the latter case, we wouldn't risk ironing it, either. However, if the care guide allows, then ironing – carefully, on a low setting and using a tea towel to protect the fabric – may help get that DWR coating working well again. ✪

WALKTHROUGH

MAKE YOUR OWN ENERGY BARS

COFFEE, NUT & DATE BARS

260 kcals, 21g carbs, 18g fat, 5.5g protein, 3.5g fibre

Ingredients *(10 servings)*

- 150g cocoa nibs
- 75g almonds
- 75g walnuts
- 150g dates
- 50g raisins
- 5g coffee powder (add for a stronger taste)
- 2 tbsp sesame seeds

1. Blend the cocoa nibs to a powder, add the nuts and mix gently to keep some texture.
2. Add dates, raisins, seeds and coffee powder, and combine well.
3. Place in a 22x22cm (approx.) tray and press the mixture firmly so it's spread evenly
4. Chill in the fridge for about an hour. Remove and cut into slices.

PEANUT BUTTER BARS

220 kcals, 4.5g protein, 30g carbs, 10.6g fat, 3.3g fibre

Ingredients *(10 servings)*

- 225g pure honey
- 180g smooth or crunchy nut butter of your choice
- 200g crispy rice cereal
- 125g shredded coconut
- 90g dried fruits or berries of your choice
- 80g honey-roasted nuts

1. In a pan, slowly heat the honey until lukewarm. Add the nut butter and mix well.
2. Add the crispy rice cereal and coconut, and combine well until the mixture has bound together. Stir in the dried fruit and nuts.
3. Pour the mixture into a greaseproof tray and press down until it's packed down evenly.
4. Cover and place in the fridge until the mixture is firm (around one hour), then slice into bars.

BLUFFER'S GUIDE

EARLY SEASON TRAINING

How to get ride-fit and ready for spring and summer

Strength and fitness

Whether you want to get competitive on the race track or just outpace your mates, you'll need to do more than just ride to get a competitive advantage on the bike. Thankfully, there are growing numbers of MTB-specific fitness plans and coaches out there to help. As a rule of thumb, you need to include weights, intervals and plyometrics in your plan, to help build upper-body strength, aerobic fitness and responsive power.

Riding time

Anticipating the lengthy post-ride clean-up that typically follows British winter sessions can make it less appealing to go out in the first place. This is understandable, but there's no better way to get ready for the season than by riding your bike, especially in winter slop. If you've trained through the worst conditions, then you're going to be one step ahead should a race day turn out to be a mud-fest!

Skills

If you practise nothing else, time spent on cornering and looking ahead is key. Being able to judge the best speed for a turn, maintain that momentum through it and then accelerate out will mean you won't lose any energy or speed through unnecessary braking. Learning to look far ahead gives your sub-conscious brain time to plan and anticipate, so you're ready for whatever feature next lies in wait.

Bike prep

If your bike's in bad shape, you won't be able to perform at your best. Start by stripping it back as far as you can. Clean, check and either regrease or replace all the bearings, including those in the bottom bracket, headset and pivot bearings. Next, inspect and thoroughly clean the drivetrain, paying particular attention to the cassette and chainring. Finally, check the brake pads, tubeless sealant and tyre treads. Consider swapping out winter tyres for lighter spring/summer ones.

ROUTES IN ASSOCIATION WITH
OS MAPS
BY ORDNANCE SURVEY

BIGRIDE

MILITARY MANOEUVRE

Max and Russell embark on an intense mission through active military territory in Wiltshire

Words Max Darkins **Photos** Russell Burton

S

WHERE ARE WE?

SAILSBURY PLAIN

The chalk plateau of Salisbury Plain covers around 300 square miles, mostly in Wiltshire but also stretching into Hampshire. Half of it is owned by the Ministry of Defence (MoD). **www.visitwiltshire.co.uk/explore/salisbury-plain**

YOUR GUIDE

MAX DARKINS

Max loves travelling up and down the country, searching for the best routes for you to ride. He's the man behind www.**roughrideguide.co.uk**

DOWNLOAD

Download the OS Maps app to ride & share this route

The vast chalk plains around Wiltshire offer some of the South's best remote ridng

For the first Big Ride of the year, I was tasked with delivering some routes with a military connection for some action-packed adventure. There are actually quite a few suitable places in the UK, from the Brecon Beacons in South Wales to the flat, sandy, suburban heathland of Surrey. The latter has some great singletrack on offer, but Russell and I weren't ready to enter into any real-life conflict on the potentially incendiary issue of access, so we decided to head further west to the quiet and more remote hills of Salisbury Plain. The rolling, chalky terrain here may not contain much snaking singletrack or many technical challenges, but it certainly delivers on big, open vistas and quick-drying trails, which is definitely a bonus in spring.

Salisbury Plain is a vast plateau of downland that covers around 300 square miles, making it the largest area of chalk grassland in North West Europe, with significant areas designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). It's also an archaeological landscape of unparalleled importance, with more than 2,300 archaeological sites dating back to 4,000BC, along with more recent Roman settlements and one of the densest concentrations of ancient barrows (earth mounds) anywhere in Britain. The military moved onto Salisbury Plain in 1867, and now own half of the area. Less than a third of this is permanently closed to the public, with the Salisbury Plain Training Area (SPTA) covering just 40x16km (25x10 miles). This means there's a lot that can still be explored by bike, aided by quick-draining chalky terrain and myriad gravel tracks.

We decided we'd investigate the (relatively) new Imber Range Perimeter Path (IRPP), which circumnavigates the Imber Range Danger Area. This 50km loop circles the perimeter fence of the Ministry of Defence's Imber Range, which was, until recently, only accessible by walkers. Over several years, both Cycling UK and the British Horse Society have worked with the MoD to develop a legal route that can be ridden on bike or horse. This does mean that many of the tracks on this route are still not shown as rights-of-way on Ordnance Survey maps, though – which can be a bit worrying when red flags are flying and you can hear explosions and tanks just over the hill!

> AT THE EDGE OF THE DANGER AREA, PASSING NUMEROUS ANCIENT BARROWS AND SETTLEMENTS, WITH THE RED FLAGS FLAPPING IN THE STRONG WIND, WE'RE NOW PROPERLY ON SALISBURY PLAIN

Into the breach

Starting from Warminster, we're immediately weaving our way between garrison posts and training grounds, which stand behind intimidating razor-wire fences, with huge trucks and 4x4s beyond, before we make our way around a series of hilltops along the edge of the Plain. These hills – Battlesbury, Middle, Scratchbury and Cotley – all once had their own hillforts, dating back to the late Bronze and Iron Ages. As we climb onto the hillside around Heytesbury, our elevation shows more recent military activity, with new camps and lines of zig-zagging trenches dug across the fields, being used to house and train Ukrainian troops.

Getting up close to the edge of the Danger Area, passing numerous ancient barrows and settlements, with the red flags flapping in the strong wind, we're now properly entering Salisbury Plain. We really feel like we're in the thick of it, too, with explosions heard to our left and squadrons advancing through the grass to our right. We nod our heads in acknowledgement and apology as we increase our cadence. With Russell not daring to get his camera

ROUTES IN ASSOCIATION WITH
OS MAPS
BY ORDNANCE SURVEY

THIS MONTH'S BIG RIDE ROUTE

MEDIUM ROUTE

IMBER RANGE PERIMETER PATH, SALISBURY PLAIN

Distance 50km (31 miles)
Climbing 660m (2,165ft)
Time 3hrs to 5hrs

Route summary: A mixture of gravel, tarmac, dirt and grass tracks that circumnavigate the perimeter of the Imber Military Range. Not technical, but a good physical challenge, with some sweet bits of singletrack, fast descents and ruts to navigate.
Start/finish: Elm Hill, Warminster (postcode BA12 0AU, grid ref ST 879 458) or Warminster railway station.

LOCATION DETAILS: The chalk plateau of Salisbury Plain covers around 300 square miles, of which half is owned by the Ministry of Defence. Less than a third of this land is permanently closed to the public, though, enabling you to explore this barren and remote area, and giving you a good chance of seeing some military manoeuvres.

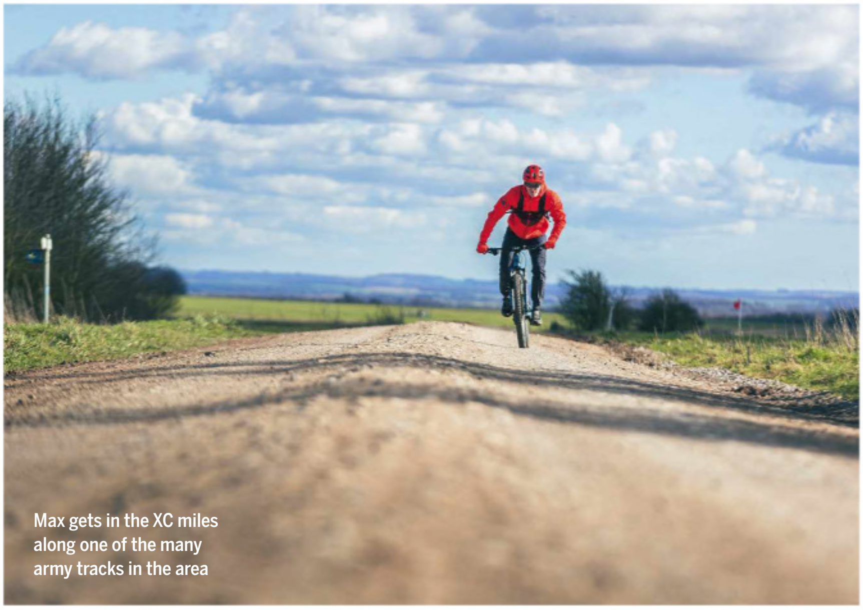
GETTING THERE: Warminster is off the A36, between Salisbury and Bath. There are long-stay car parks in Warminster (and Westbury, but the White Horse car park isn't recommended for long-term parking), plus a railway station, too.

MAPS & BOOKS: *Ordnance Survey Landranger 183: Yeovil & Frome* and *184: Salisbury & The Plain. Mountain Bike Rides in & around Wiltshire & Dorset* by Max Darkins (Rough Ride Guide).

FACILITIES: There's very little out there, but the Rose & Crown in Tilshead comes at a good time in the ride and there's a shop at the petrol station in the village. Car Mart in Warminster has some basic bike parts (01985 212467). The town has a selection of places to eat, drink and sleep (*www.warminstercommunityhub.co.uk*).

DOWNLOAD RIDE
& SHARE THIS ROUTE
https://bit.ly/MBUK420-ImberRange

Despite its barren appearance, there's plenty of variety to the riding here



Max gets in the XC miles along one of the many army tracks in the area

out and ask for a quick snap, we're soon descending off Breakheart Hill, down into Chitterne village, before a rooty singletrack climb delivers us back out onto the barren landscape of the Plain, and a whole military training village. This FIBUA (Fighting in Built Up Areas) model was originally built in 1987 to resemble a German village and has been used for training for the Cold War, Balkans conflict, Northern Ireland, Iraq, Afghanistan and now for the current war in Ukraine. No doubt it'll keep getting re-invented as time goes on. We stand and look down the war-torn village street, with rubble piled high outside the shells of buildings, mirroring the atrocious state many Ukrainian cities are now in. Trucks and tanks can be heard rumbling along behind the trees, and explosions send vibrations and shockwaves through the otherwise eerily quiet air, silencing the chirping birds and our thoughts.

Coming like a ghost town

We decide to head on, and my rumbling stomach makes the executive decision to quickly deviate off the route and dip back into civilisation for a spot of lunch at the pub in Tilshead. It's just about the only place along the route to find refreshments and, with a long stretch back across the northern leg of the route, into a firm headwind, I decide I need something more than my bag of Haribo. Back on the route, a good section of sheltered singletrack briefly protects us from the wind, before we're hugging the edge of the Danger Area once more. With flags flapping and copious barriers with signs warning of danger, we follow the IRPP as it kinks this way and that, chopping and changing between grass, concrete, dirt and gravel tracks, but it's all well signposted here. Off in the heart of the Danger Area, to the left, is Imber village, which was evacuated in November 1943 to train American troops for the D-Day landings. The 152 villagers, who were tenants on this MoD-owned land, were gathered in the school hall and told they had just 47 days to leave their homes. Provided with a small amount of money for moving costs, but no re-housing, they were promised they'd be able to return after the war, but that never happened. The village is supposed to be open to the public 50 days a year, but is usually only accessible at Easter, Christmas, New Year and in August. If you're lucky enough to time it right, it

Dip into the woods and there's lots of singletrack to explore

BEST EATING

WARMINSTER, WILTSHIRE

There are a few places to choose from for refreshments in Warminster. A couple that stand out are **The Old Fire Station**, ideal if you want good food and ambience, and **The Coffee Garden**, a brilliant cafe that serves up great grub and delicious coffee. They don't have anywhere to sit with/leave your bike, though. Out on the ride, the **Rose & Crown** in Tilshead is the only real option, but it's a good one – a friendly country pub with a good selection of tasty food and drinks, plus outside seating, and it's only just off the route.

> WITH THE NORTHERN LEG OF THE ROUTE AHEAD, INTO A FIRM HEADWIND, I DECIDE I NEED SOMETHING MORE THAN MY BAG OF HARIBO

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Ordnance Survey

DANGER!

Although the Imber Range's Danger Area is mostly well marked with signs, red flags, fences and barricades, it's not entirely clear on the ground, or obviously waymarked, at times. There are additional (MoD and farm) tracks and concrete roads that aren't always shown on the OS maps, and with red flags flying, tanks rumbling close by and explosions (hopefully) in the distance, it can feel a bit discombobulating at times. This route is available to ride at all times, but you should strictly obey all Danger Area notices, safety signs and noticeboards, and military personnel – follow their guidance at all times for your own safety. Also, be aware that some military tracks can be closed without warning. Salisbury Plain is first and foremost a military training area, so for your own safety and enjoyment, stick to the public (and permissive) rights of way, and comply with flags and signs. Don't wander off rights-of-way, because there's the possibility that unexploded ordnance may contaminate an area. And, of course, never enter any of the many military training buildings, disused tank hulks or trenches, because these are always off-limits – not to mention, often used as target practice!

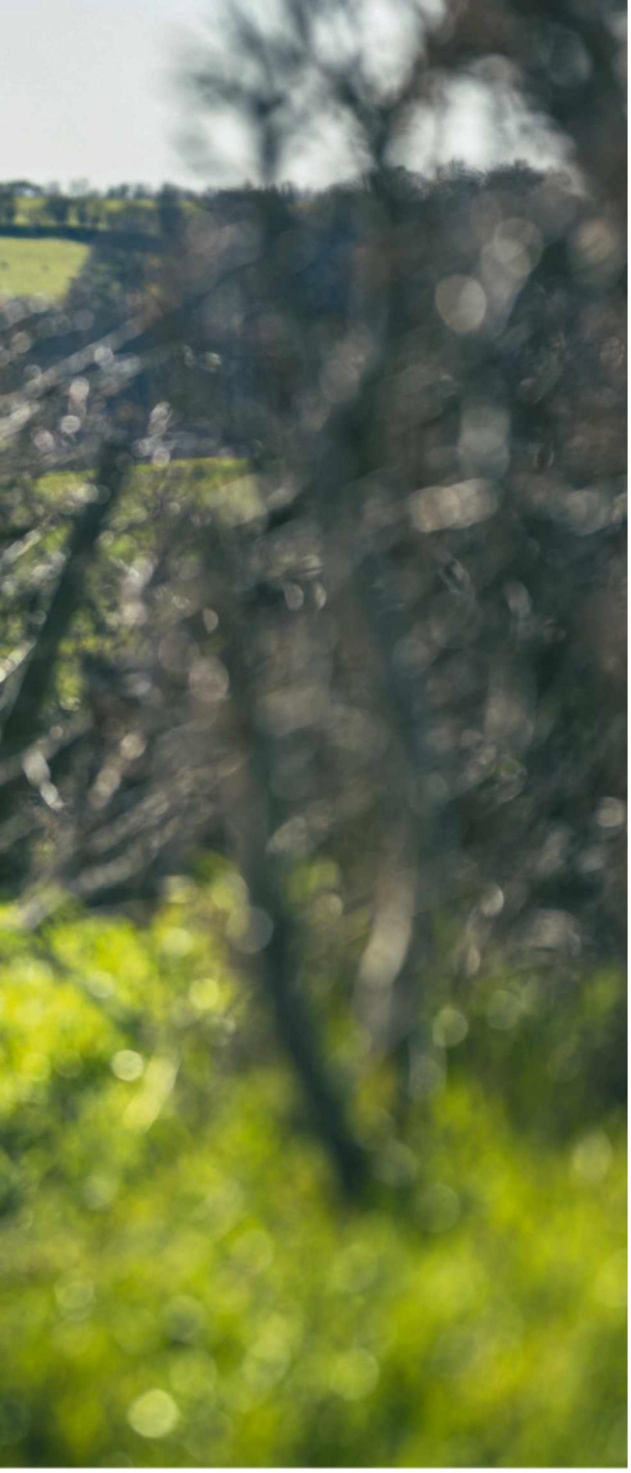
> AS IF ON CUE, A THUNDERING CHINOOK HELICOPTER COMES SLOWLY OVER OUR HEADS, SOMEHOW SHAKING THE GROUND JUST AS MUCH AS THE TANKS EARLIER HAD

makes for an interesting detour and you should definitely have a look at the letter issued to the tenants, which is on display in the church.

Get to the chopper

It feels a bit more away from the action along this section, although Russell, being a local, tells me it's not usually this quiet, especially with all the additional troops and training for Ukraine. The strong wind in my face and long straight track ahead definitely require a head-down approach as we progress along the metalled track. Then, as if on cue, a thundering Chinook helicopter comes slowly over our heads, somehow shaking the ground just as much as the tanks earlier had. Soon after, we're on our final jaunt back to the start as the route bears southwards, by the site of another Iron Age hillfort and the 180ft-tall Westbury White Horse figure, cut into the escarpment of Salisbury Plain. You can't see the horse from here, but the views of everything else are great.

A long, fast descent is quickly followed by an inevitable lengthy climb back up onto the Plain, but the track is good and there's a chance to watch some troops manoeuvre up the hillside as we ride along the edge of this large and busy rifle range area. With just a muddy track along the final ridgetop to complete our journey, we stop to look down over the large, bustling Warminster Training Centre to the left and conclude that it's been more of an adventure than a standard MTB ride. To see even just this smallest glimpse of military life has been



eye-opening, and brought increased respect and admiration for what these people do to keep us safe. And yet, despite being so close to all this today, I still feel detached, perched high above the camp. It seems stranger still that I'm here in the middle of a serene golf course while contemplating it all.

All that's left now is a fun, steep descent down through the trees to finish the ride off with a (metaphorical) bang, which plunges us back to our reality and my van at the bottom of the hill. After a quick wash of the bike, I bid farewell to Russell and go on my own final mission of the day – to find some food and reflect on the ride. It hasn't been a technical route by any means, but has provided a decent physical challenge and something quite different from the norm – a thoroughly interesting time, beyond the riding, which is always a welcome and refreshing experience. ✪

THIS MONTH'S BONUS ROUTES

EASY ROUTE

CAPE WRATH, SCOTLAND

Stats: 38.3km (23.8 miles)
Climbing 800m (2,624ft)
Time 2hrs to 4hrs

Route summary: A wild and remote ride, and fairly long for an 'easy' route, but it's not technical, cruising along a rough 4x4 track, with few and light gradients.
Start/finish: The ferry jetty down the road from Durness (postcode IV27 4SN, grid ref NC 377/662)

LOCATION DETAILS: Known as the last wilderness in the UK, the remote Cape Wrath is one of Britain's iconic cornerstones, where the north and west coasts of Scotland meet. This ride has spectacular views, dramatic coastlines, the truly epic Atlantic Ocean, and a vast moorland wilderness all in one place. It's an SSSI, as well as a Special Protection Area for birds. The land is largely owned by the MoD, who use it as a training range, so access is prohibited at times. Call 0800 833300 to check.

GETTING THERE: At the north-westernmost point of mainland Scotland, near Durness on the A838, the ride starts with the Keoldale Ferry, which is £10 for a return trip, for you and your bike. It runs when the tides and weather allow, between May to September. Call Malcolm the ferryman beforehand on 07719 544 207. He may operate outside of these months, by prior arrangement.

MAPS & BOOKS: *Ordnance Survey Landranger 9: Cape Wrath, Scotland. Scotland Mountain Biking: The Wild Trails* by Phil McKane (Vertebrate Publishing).

FACILITIES: Stay at Cape Wrath Lodge on the mainland at Keoldale (01971 511212, *www.capewrath.co.uk*), Kearvaig Bothy on the route or Cape Wrath Lighthouse, which has a (24-hour) cafe and dormitory bunkhouse (01971 511 284, *www.visitcapewrath.com*). Further facilities are available in Durness.

DOWNLOAD RIDE & SHARE THIS ROUTE
https://bit.ly/MBUK420-CapeWrath

MEDIUM ROUTE

PEMBREY SANDS, SOUTH WALES

Distance 26.4km (16.4 miles)
Climbing 330m (1,082ft)
Time 2hrs to 3hrs

Route summary: Explore both the hillside inland and the forested coastline beside the Pembrey Sands Air Weapons Range, which is primarily an air-to-ground bombing site, used Monday to Friday.
Start/finish: Pembrey Country Park car park (postcode SA16 0EJ, grid ref SN 403/001)

LOCATION DETAILS: Pembrey Country Park and Forest cover around 3,000 acres and include eight miles of beach. There are family-friendly cycle trails and some singletrack in the southern half of the forest, but not all of the tracks are open to cyclists (www.visitwales.com).

GETTING THERE: Follow the M4 along Wales's south coast until shortly after Swansea, then turn left on the A4138. Follow the signs for Pembrey Country Park, past Llanelli, to Burry Port. There's some short-term parking here by the harbour, but continue to the country park, where there's plenty of space, along with refreshments.

MAPS & BOOKS: *Ordnance Survey Landranger 159: Swansea & Gower. Wales Mountain Biking – Beicio Mynydd Cymru* by Tom Hutton (Vertebrate Publishing).

FACILITIES: The country park has a campsite and caravan park, a bar, restaurant, cafe and beachside kiosks. There's also an outdoor shower, barbecue areas, crazy golf, a playground, a miniature railway, a dry ski slope, a toboggan ride and bike hire (01554 834443, *www.pembreycountrypark.wales*)

DOWNLOAD RIDE & SHARE THIS ROUTE
https://bit.ly/MBUK420-Pembrey

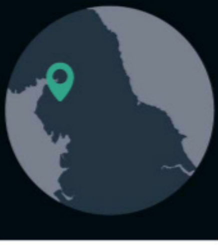
TRAILCREW

ALTURA TRAIL WHINLATTER

The longest purpose-built, all-weather trail in the Lakes, housed in England's only mountain forest

Words Rachel Bennet **Pics** James Vincent

THE ALTURA TRAIL, WHINLATTER, LAKE DISTRICT



TRAIL STATS

Distance
19km (12 miles) for both loops

Time
1hr 30mins to 3hrs

Grading
Red with optional black add-on

WHY RIDE HERE?

Stunning views and all-weather surfaces make this an ideal destination at any time of year

RAD...

- The red loop is split in two, with the trail centre in the middle – perfect for a lunch stop or for less fit riders
- It can be ridden in all weathers, as we proved with our snowy escapade!
- Great facilities

BAD...

- Parking is expensive
- Limited number of trails
- Bike wash was broken on our visit

Whinlatter
Bike trails
RIDE THE ALTURA TRAIL...
Forestry Commission England
Mountains of bike trails...

Who doesn't love a good info board and trail map?

As we drive up the mountain pass towards Whinlatter Forest, it looks more like the Alps than the Lake District in March. The trees hang heavy with snow and white peaks stand proud beyond. This is my first visit to Whinlatter, and pretty far from what I pictured. As we roll into the Forestry England car park, we're eager to establish whether any of the trails are actually ridable.

We amble up the hill towards Cyclewise, the on-site bike shop, to get the lowdown on the conditions and take a sneak peek down the north loop of the Altura trail. I'm relieved to see the route looking more than doable. The guys at the shop confirm my suspicion: "Yeah, the trails are open, they're just icy!" It looks like we're on, then!

White out

With the unpredictable weather making it a last-minute decision to go ahead with our Whinlatter visit, our crew is a little thin on the ground this issue. Local snapper James Vincent and I are joined by Stif Mountain Bikes rider Issy Hill for a winter wonderland ride – in spring. The Altura route is split into two parts, with both beginning and ending at the trail centre. After a quick chat, we head up the fireroad to the start of the north loop, a 10km (six-mile) red trail that meanders through the forest and up onto the hillside, before dropping down to the trail centre through some fast berms and small jumps.

The trail cuts through the snowy trees like a slithering snake, while sharp green flashes of moss and Sitka spruce peek through the white blanket. A week ago, the vegetation was prepping for the new life of spring, but it's now been plunged back into the depths of winter. This singletrack section is littered with little stony patches and sneaky roots jutting out, to keep you on your toes. The trail undulates across the slope with whooshing descents followed by sharp climbs, before becoming more of a gradual ascent as we pop out onto the fireroad. Deep snow makes wheelspins commonplace as we try to catch each other on the ascents. Why is it that the white stuff always brings out people's playful side?

Slip and slide

This high-mountain forest is enjoyed by more than just mountain bikers. A whippet struts into view and a trail runner nips past us on the fireroad before we drop down a rocky chute and continue onwards and upwards. Despite the snow, the trail is riding well. Climbs are kept interesting with the constant battle to maintain grip, and the descents are intense as we skate round corners, with the compact snow and icy patches adding extra spice. There's nothing overly technical or gnarly on the

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

Locals do...

Park on the way up the pass (there are a few spots to use) to avoid the hefty charge

Take a camera – the views are Instagram-worthy

Locals don't...

Rely on others. Go prepared – the Altura trail takes you onto remote terrain

Forget to pay for parking (if using an official space!)

STEEP, SWOOPING BERMS ARE FOLLOWED BY A CHANCE TO GET AIRTIME BEFORE YOU'RE BACK IN THE GLISTENING FOREST, SLASHING THROUGH SNOWY CORNERS

Chasing each other up the climbs keeps the stoke alive

MEET THE CREW

RACHEL BENNET

Staff writer Rach's first riding trip to the Lakes did not disappoint

JAMES VINCENT

Now local, James is well versed in capturing the area's beauty on camera

ISSY HILL

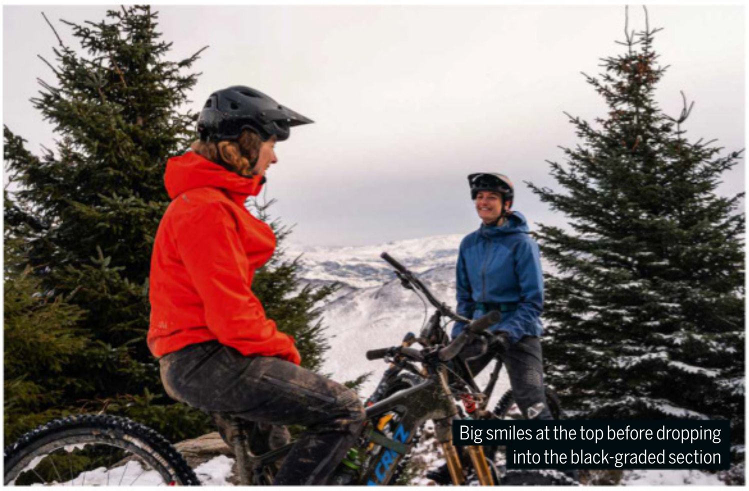
Stif rider Issy is at home among the hills – the steeper the better

TRAILCREW WISDOM

JAMES VINCENT, PHOTOGRAPHER & LAKES LOCAL

"The views are amazing – so much better than at a lot of trail centres, where you're just doing endless laps of a nondescript forest. At Whinlatter, you really do get the feeling that you're riding in the mountains, with incredible scenes wherever you look. There's stuff for all ages and abilities, and the climbs are interesting enough to keep you entertained, rather than being just another fireroad slog. The north loop has a bit more tech, while the south one is a proper rollercoaster, with an extra black add-on if you've got the legs."

There are heaps of fast, flowy corners that are good fun at any time of year



Big smiles at the top before dropping into the black-graded section

Issy gets loose in a slushy corner and manages to stay rubber-side-down – just!

A FEW ROCKY FEATURES LEAD ONTO FAST, NARROW SINGLETRACK, WHICH PRODUCES BIG GRINS ALL ROUND. THIS IS WHERE WE LET IT GET LOOSE

purpose-built trails in Whinlatter, but you can pick up a fair amount of speed to get your thrills.

The final descent back to the trail centre is particularly pleasurable, with steep, swooping berms out in the open, followed by a chance to get airtime before you're back in the glistening forest, slashing through snowy corners. Pure brilliance! After this exhilarating last section of the north loop, it's time for a quick bite to eat and a loo break – a bad time to be wearing so many layers to fight the cold.

Back to black

The 9km (5.5-mile) south loop has an optional black add-on – which, of course, we're going to take. It offers epic views across the Lake District, giving you the sense of being on a real mountain mission. The climb through the snow-heavy trees consists of tight switchbacks and deep, fluffy powder snow, making for an energy-sapping ascent. It feels like an age before we top-out in a small clearing. Issy and I are stoked to be able to descend again, and this part of the trail offers more interesting features to navigate than the red bits did, although it's still pretty mellow compared to the blacks at places such as Glentress.

From the top, a few rocky features lead onto fast narrow singletrack, which produces big grins all round. This is where we let it get loose – cutting around corners feet-out, traction at an all-time low, cranking hard to make the jumps on a tabletop line and all failing miserably as the snow steals our speed. We're all taming this trail with ease until I blast around a corner to find James upside-down in a snowdrift, having had a disagreement with a patch of ice.

It isn't long before the conditions claim another victim. James challenges us not to pedal as we rejoin the red section. Pumping hard, it's all going well until my front wheel washes out on an icy corner and I faceplant in a snowy ditch, much to Issy's amusement. With only our egos damaged, we push on, enjoying the last few sections of flowing singletrack through the snow-capped Sitkas, before returning to the trail centre.

Whatever the weather

It's not only the Altura loops that are on offer here at Whinlatter. The blue-graded Quercus trail is fun, fast and flowy, with some wee features to improve your riding. It's a great introductory route, or ideal to build skills on and push your speed. All the trails are well-made and maintained, and ridable year-round – fortunately for our trip! There aren't a massive number of them to sink your teeth into, but still more than enough to get a good day's riding under your belt. ✪

THE DIRECTORY

EVERYTHING YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT **THE ALTURA TRAIL, WHINLATTER**

GET THERE

By road: Whinlatter is close to Braithwaite on the B5292 (Whinlatter Pass), four miles west of Keswick, in the northern Lake District. The postcode to use is CA12 5TW.

By rail: There's no easy access by train, unfortunately.

FACILITIES

Bike shop, bike and e-bike rental, coaching, cafe, parking, toilets and visitor centre.

NEARBY BIKE SHOPS

Cyclewise Whinlatter is on-site, with servicing, products and bike rental, including full-sus and e-bikes. *www.cyclewise.co.uk*

CONTACT

www.forestryengland.uk/whinlatter-forest/cycling-and-mountain-biking-trails-whinlatter

OTHER RIDING

Grizedale
An hour's drive south, the Lakes' other trail centre is a good option when the forecast looks sketchy.

Sticks Pass
One of the many natural routes on offer here. A steep climb from Glenridding gives you epic views before a tech descent.

VERDICT

A great place for families, beginners and seasoned riders alike. The trails are well-marked and offer enough to keep experts entertained while being accessible to less experienced shredders. Jaw-dropping views make this a great riding destination at any time, although more trails would be welcome.

★★★★☆

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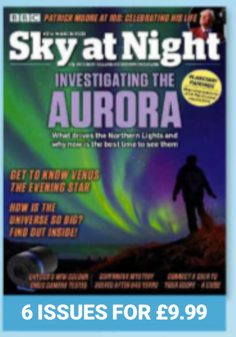
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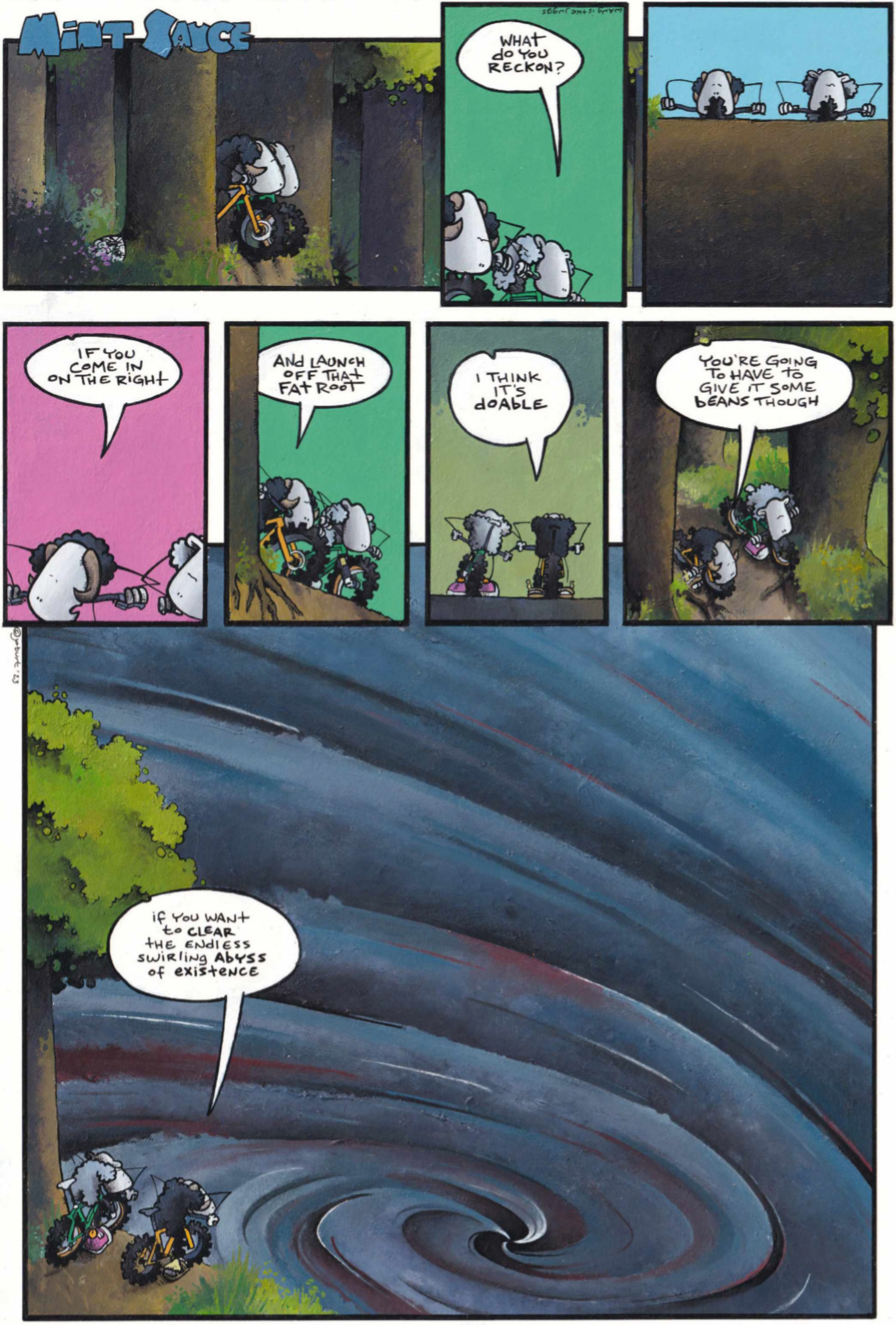
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